Pro Wrestling's Most Controversial Legit All-American Babyface
Exposes The Game's *Only* Remaining Secrets

CHOKE HOLD

Pro Wrestling's Real Mayhem Outside the Ring

Untold Stories of Greed, Abuse and Betrayal

Jim Wilson

(a/k/a "The Pittsburgh Bulldog," "Big Jim Wilson, the All-American Kid" and "The Masked Avenger") College Football Star, NFL Lineman and Veteran of 1,000+ Pro Wrestling Matches Worldwide

Weldon T. Johnson

“Attitude problem? Yeah, I’ve got an attitude problem. So did George Washington. And Abe Lincoln. So did Martin Luther King. So did Lech Walesa. Anybody who fights for human or civil rights has an attitude problem. That’s OK I figure I’m in pretty good company.” - Big Jim Wilson.

Chokehold, Pro Wrestlings Real Mayhem Outside the Ring peals apart the secret world of pro wrestling from inside the ring. The storyteller is James Milligan Wilson, All-American football player, survivor of seven years in the NFL and pro wrestler for over 15 years. This book retraces Wilson’s journey from legitimate athletic stardom to the sleazy circuit of pro wrestling where he was promised the world championship and wealth. Wilson reveals not only the mat game’s intriguing secrets about how the audience is entertained with orchestrated scripts and stunts but also wrestling’s less visible cons - the industry’s exploitation of wrestlers, its history of illegal business practices and its corruption of state athletic commissions. Wrestling’s needed reforms are identified with specific proposals.

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“The wrestling business takes advantage of anybody who has any notoriety or ability. You got to understand that wrestlers are worse than whores. They are pimped. They use you as long as they possibly can or as long as you don’t complain. When you complain, they get rid of you.” - Thunderbolt Patterson, former wrestling champion.

“Wrestling operated under some of the most unfair working conditions in the country. I don’t know how they got away with it for so many years. The WWF was supposed to change things, but it hadn’t turned out that way.” - Jesse Ventura, former wrestler (now Minnesota Governor).

“When it comes to paychecks, muscle bound pro wrestlers have no leverage.” - Forbes Magazine.

“How does wrestling or at least the WWF, treat its own? It’s no babyface, that’s for sure.” - Sports Illustrated.

“It’s such a crooked business. The guys [wrestlers] are a bunch of crooks. They steal from the marks and the promoters steal from them.. The guys [wrestlers] want to be stars! They’ll do anything - they’ll cut throats for it. Actually, wrestlers dorít have to be paid.. All they need is a couple of six packs of beer a night and a nice looking ring rat with a good body. Or, drugs and a ring rat. Its not the money. Its being a star! Its the glory and the pussy”” - Magnificent Zulu, former wrestler.

“The human costs have escalated totally out of control. The rehab visits, the near fatal car crashes, the overdoses and the flukes are way out of hand . . . the wrestlers, more than ever before, are pawns of an ugly system with no.o insurance, no.o collective bargaining and unsafe working conditions.” - Dave Meltzer, wrestling journalist.

About the authors - Jim Wilson’s distinguished collegiate football career brought recognition as a 1964 consensus All-American offensive and defensive tackle for his play at the University of Georgia. He was elected to the 1965 NFL All-Rookie Team as a member of the San Francisco 49ers, the University of Georgia All-Decade Football Team, University of Georgia All-Time Team, and Helms Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame. Wilson played two years with the 49ers, one season with the Atlanta Falcons and four years with the Los Angeles Rams. Wilson was named to the Georgia State Sports Hall of Fame in 2001 and the Western Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 2002. Wilson’s experiences in wrestling resulted in Federal antitrust litigation against the wrestling industry, and he later established a union for pro wrestlers and campaigned to establish an athletic commission to regulate pro wrestling in Georgia. Today, Jim Wilson works in commercial and residential real estate in Georgia and South Carolina.

Weldon Johnson is a Chicago sociologist who studied and taught criminology and sociology of law for 25 years at several universities, and was associated with two Presidential commissions that investigated underworld criminal justice and public policy.

In Support of Jim Wilson's Wrestling Reforms —

"Because you are a former professional football player and a long time member of the National Football League Players Association, you understand the need to protect all professional athletes from disabling injuries and further, to afford them some protection from the unscrupulous promoters who have historically taken advantage of young and inexperienced professional athletes. The National Football League Players Association, representing 4,000 active and retired NFL players, applauds your stalwart effort to secure fair treatment for professional wrestlers and boxers."- *Gene Upshaw, Executive director, National Football League Players Association.*

"If I can ever be of help, let me know."-Ronald Reagan, former President of the United States.

"With a combined experience of over 45 years in professional wrestling and over five years of hard work invested in the passage of legislation to improve the safety of this popular support, Jim Wilson and Thunderbolt Patterson have the knowledge and commitment required to serve successfully on the [Georgia State Boxing and Wrestling] Commission."- *Andrew Young, Civil Rights Leader and former U.S. Congressman, US Ambassador to United Nations and Mayor of Atlanta.*

"I share your concerns and agree that all professional athletic events should be governed by adequate health and safety standards. As governor, I will undertake a full review of your proposals to see if we can find a way to fit them within the cost constraints of the state budget." *-Zell Miller, former Georgia Governor and currently US. Senator from Georgia·*

“As someone who has fought for freedom and dignity all my life, I can certainly relate to your struggles in professional wrestling and to your quest to establish a wrestling commission in Georgia. I salute your efforts to form a union on the national level to protect and upgrade the position of the performers. I whole-heartedly endorse and support your efforts

and look forward to working with you to change the “independent contractor” status that now prevails in pro wrestling.”-*John Lewis, U.S. Congressman from Georgia.*

“I certainly understand and share your concern for the health and safety of professional wrestlers. As Governor, I would give careful consideration to such legislation should it be passed by the General Assembly.”-Roy *E. Barnes, former Governor of Georgia.*

“All through my legislative career, I have been supportive of efforts to set standards of conduct for various occupational groups. I would certainly be supportive of establishing a commission to ensure the safety of all those who participate in the boxing and wrestling professions.”- *Johnny Isakson, U.S. Congressman from Georgia.*

“ . . . I think Big Jim Wilson and Thunderbolt Patterson should be the people in the State of Georgia to hold two seats on the newly formed Wrestling Commission . . . they represent a symbol of unity and harmony between the races.”-*Hamilton E. Holmes, M.D. With Charlane Hunter·, the first black student to enter and graduate from the University of Georgia.*

“The Concerned Black Clergy of Metro Atlanta, Georgia has always been in support of issues which uphold, encourage and protect human rights. Therefore, we support and salute you in your endeavor to establish a wrestling commission in Georgia. We also agree with the need to organize a union on a national level to protect and upgrade the position of professional wrestlers.*”-Rev. McKinely Young, President, Concerned Black Clergy of Metro Atlanta.*

“I firmly believe that all professionals should be accorded just and dignified treatment. I commend your efforts to establish a wrestling commission in the State of Georgia as well as a national union to protect the rights of professional wrestlers. I gladly endorse these and similar attempts to protect human dignity.”-Most *Rev. Eugene A.. Marino, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Atlanta.*

PRO WRESTLING'S REAL MAYHEM OUTSIDE THE RING

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JIM WILSON
A/K/A "THE PITTSBURGH B ULLDOG," "BIG J IM WILSON, THE
ALL-AMERICAN KID"
AND "THE MASKED AVENGER"
&
WELDON T. J OHNSON

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER NOTES AND SOURCES

In memory of the older ***boys*** whose broken bodies and shattered lives should have taught us something - ***and*** as a challenge to the new ***boys*** who haven't yet had enough pain or abuse or time to figure it out. And to get our most important act ***organized***

"Why are we *now* hearing this story?"

"More guys are getting tired of it
- the *chokehold* on them and losing everything they got
and paying their dues and not getting anything back."

-Anonymous Georgia wrestler *Lifetime-TV's America Talks Back, 1985*

PROLOGUE

THIS BOOK IS about the *business* of professional wrestling, and my experiences in it. Unlike other recent wrestling books, my purpose is not to *put* myself *over[1]* or to celebrate pro wrestling's longstanding appeal. Instead, this book's objective is to describe pro wrestling's unromantic underside, a secret world of exploitation, abuse and illegality, and to make the case for wrestling's needed reforms.

The stories told in this book are a combination of autobiography, history and description of current events in the wrestling industry - *The Business,* as insiders call it. Much of this book's content has not been discussed very openly until now. And for good reason: *almost nobody has taken pro wrestling seriously for a long, long time.* Which is understandable since the last legitimate pro wrestling match in the United States was staged in the early 1900s. Since then, pro wrestling has undergone many transformations in style and presentation, but it's still all performance - a *work,* as insiders call it. Not *fake,* but a *work.* But whatever we name it, it's tough to find an audience for a serious discussion (or serious book) about a topic generally dismissed as not to be taken seriously.

So far as the public is concerned, the only serious side to pro wrestling is the amount of money it makes. And it's true. The business of staging and orchestrating pro wrestling is one of the longest running success stories in the history of sport or entertainment, having brought surprising wealth to its promoters. In the United States, pro wrestling was a successful business long before boxing was legalized and certainly before pro football, basketball, hockey, golf, tennis and bowling became popular. And although pro wrestling may have been more popular in the 1950s than today (in terms of arena attendance and TV ratings), there are more pro wrestling dollars today than ever before because of wrestling's new revenue sources: pay-per-view TV, merchandising and TV advertising in not only U.S., but in many other countries around the world.

But pro wrestling's consumers - the spenders of those serious dollars - aren't taken very seriously, either. In the old days, wrestling fans were regarded as blue-collar knuckle draggers, dim-witted and a little bent. Today, another stereotype prevails: "12-to 19-year-old, pimply-faced, mean spirited males," said USA Networks boss Barry Diller recently. But I don't join these denigrations. I know about wrestling fans because I was one of them, and they are much maligned. Having been a fan - and I still am - I understand their passions, their joy of triumph and anger over defeat.

I got to know more about wrestling's fans from inside the ring, and I can still sense their noisy, pulsating presence - the beery din, flailing fingers and upraised arms through ringside smoke. And I came to understand *why* wrestling's audience is livelier than those of collegiate and professional sport - the wrestling crowd, unlike the others, *knows* that it's going to have a good time. This is the basis, obviously, of both pro wrestling's appeal and its dismissal: its odd combination of sport and theater into something that is neither, something that doesn't fit a conventional category.

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Beyond arguments about what pro wrestling is or is not, and away from popular dismissal of wrestling's stunts and gimmicks as lowlifer sleaze, is another unexamined reality. And that is the view of the pro wrestling business from within. It's not pretty, and it may surprise you.

Having played collegiate football in the Southeastern Conference and for another seven years in the NFL, I was no stranger to violence but I was unprepared to deal with pro wrestling's genuine brutality and barbarism: from inside the ring, where both bones and promises were broken intentionally; from inside locker rooms where careers were scripted for stardom or extinction; from inside promotional offices where wrestling's revenues were counted at least three times - once for the taxman, once for the wrestlers, and once for the promoters. And from inside touring carloads and plane loads of traveling *heels* and *babyfaces* who understood how they got into The Business but couldn't find a way up or out.

Although much in pro wrestling has changed since my days and nights on the mat, this industry's business practices are its only remaining secret and cruelest con: *professional wrestling's institutionalized abuse of labor is unsurpassed in other sport and entertainment.* That's a strong indictment, and I use this book to document it, both in the text and in the Chapter Notes at the end of this book.

One of the peculiarities of the abusive labor practices I describe is that very few of its victims - *the boys,* as wrestlers are known inside the industry - are willing to talk openly about them. As such, my single voice has often been lost in other wrestlers' deafening silence. Only a wrestler or former wrestler can understand why most *boys* avoid the road down which I've traveled for 28 years. Most employed wrestlers avoid talking openly about wrestling's working conditions because they are controlled by the fear of losing their jobs; unemployed wrestlers avoid the matter if they have any hope of getting regular employment. other wrestlers avoid the topic for fear of losing their audience - wrestlers don't want their fans to know about their paltry earnings and other demeaning conditions of their employment. Still other wrestlers don't complain because they are as lost as their devoted fans in pro wrestling's fanciful space and time, out of touch with labor practices in both sport and entertainment; they haven't yet computed their travel expenses and have no idea of how much they actually earn or how they'll pay medical bills when injured. And today's younger *boys* don't read wrestler obituaries, remaining happily ignorant of this industry's historical trail of broken lives.

Finally, there is another reason: In the past, when some wrestler did complain publicly about his or her treatment (as I and a few others did) and it generated publicity in newspapers or on TV, the public's response to such complaints was unsympathetic, focusing instead on pro wrestling's legitimacy. The public's indifference often is expressed in the question, "Isn't this all fake, anyway?" This is what I mean when I say that no one takes pro wrestling seriously. Both wrestling's carnival origins and its stigmatized audience have led to a quick dismissal by the larger society - by the mainstream press, the government and pro wrestling's parent institutions, sport and theater. But the persistence of pro wrestling's unfair and often illegal labor practices reveals something important about a business built on secrets: the old code of *kayfabe* still sustains the

mythology thought to be required for a wrestling audience, and it continues to insure the quiet compliance of those who are admitted to the charade as co-conspirators. Under these conditions, wrestlers are not inclined to talk freely nor complain loudly.

As a onetime wrestling insider, I am using this book to talk about the side of pro wrestling that the industry doesn't want you to know about. But after decades of wrestler abuse and betrayal, I am going to tell it all because this story has been contained long enough and hurt too many for too long. This is not another wrestling exposé calculated to undress the pantomime. Instead, my objective is to show that the pro wrestling industry has more appalling abuses than its predetermined outcomes and more seriously harmed victims than its unsuspecting young fans. Pro wrestling's most contemptible secret is not its bad acting nor predetermined outcomes, but its abuse of the performers.

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It is for these reasons that the book is entitled *Chokehold, Pro Wrestling's Real Mayhem Outside the Ring.* In wrestling, the *chokehold* (also known as *stranglehold)* is one of the oldest maneuvers known and is regarded as the most dangerous. If applied effectively, it will cause death through the forced constriction of the esophagus, which is why it has been generally prohibited. Frank Alvin Gotch, an early American wrestling champion, said in 1913 that "The stranglehold is a discarded relic of the early ages of wrestling. It is rightfully barred from championship matches, but still may be an effective means of defense in handling a bully or saving one's life in a personal encounter with a robber or murderer. It is the most dangerous grip in wrestling."

But there is another meaning associated with *chokehold*, and this one signals the content of this book. Outside wrestling, *chokehold* refers to a force or influence that obstructs or constricts or smothers and suppresses freedom—the liberties of unrestricted growth and expression and progress. This book ultimately concludes that the most dangerous *chokehold* in pro wrestling is not the illusion of strangling inside the ring, but the reality of abusive control exercised outside it. Pro wrestling's bloodiest brawls do not

occur in the ring, but in its locker rooms and offices, where promoter greed, abuse and betrayal is routinely practiced with the same scripted outcome as each wrestler's match. Not many wrestlers will risk talking about it, but pro wrestling's real badguys — its genuine *heels* —are the industry's owners, operators and promoters who still control and manipulate The Business as iron-fisted feudal lords.

Pro wrestling is a bizarre world where bad acting is good business and its only real fights are over the *boys'* fair share of the industry's booty and access to medical insurance and pension plans. This is an entertainment industry whose performers use needles to produce charisma and pills to reduce pain, where a wrestler's *finish* is as often an OD as a DQ. Although pro wrestling is now out of the closet, it is still a con game: now its performers are *marks* and their customers *smart.* There is a tragic component to wrestling's farce, a deadly serious game that the big guys almost always lose.

Chapter 1

THE END OF *KAYFABE*

MY STORY ABOUT professional wrestling probably should start in 1985. That was the year I became truly famous in wrestling. That was the year I *turned* ultimate *heel* in the view of wrestling promoters and many wrestlers. That was the year, older *boys* still say, that everything changed. That may have been the year the code of *kayfabe* ended.

And that also was the year of my final appearance as a pro wrestler. By then, I'd been *blackballed* by the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), not once, but twice. If I were to ever wrestle again, it would have to be for the small, usually local promoters who tried to operate independently of the NWA. It had been awhile since the NWA blacklisted me the first time, and a lot of lawsuits had been settled since then. I didn't realize just how much dust was kicked up by telling the truth about pro wrestling until I entered the paint-chipped dressing room of the old Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on a cool December evening in 1985 with a gym bag stuffed with wrestling gear. I had been booked to wrestle an international tag team match with Mando Guerrero, billed as "The Pride of Mexico," against Wildman Armstrong and Chief Blackhawk, whoever they were in the real world. As I dressed, several wrestlers walked over to shake my hand. Some said they appreciated what I'd done on behalf of all of them to improve working conditions in pro wrestling. The only wrestler who was not happy to make my acquaintance was my tag team partner for later that night, Mando Guerrero. Although he was pretty small for wrestling, he talked like a big guy.

"Why the hell are *you* here?" he snapped. "You're a traitor! Why are you trying to wrestle after what you did on *20/20?* You're hurting the rest of us just be being here," Guerrero railed. Another wrestler walked over, whispering, "Right on, man, this is what wrestling needs." Another said, "Shit, we need something, and we're not going to get it unless someone speaks out." As it developed, all the wrestlers at the Olympic that night had

an opportunity to become better acquainted while we waited for the promoter to decide whether to cancel the show because of a small crowd. The local promoter had not done much to advertise outside the Pakistani community, and the old Olympic Auditorium looked enormous with only a hundred spectators assembled at bell-time. While the first match went on, the rest of the cast sat in the dressing room and argued about whether they deserved to be paid if the show was ultimately canceled. I told the other wrestlers that in California, the state athletic commission required promoters to post a bond as a guarantee that wrestlers got paid.

Across the locker room, my old friend Magnificent Zulu (Ron Pope) from Shadyside, Pittsburgh did the cheerleading, saying, “Listen to Big Jim, guys.” There was more arguing until the promoter walked in after the opening match and announced he was canceling the rest of the show. When the promoter walked out of the locker room, I told the *boys* the same thing I’d said earlier: according to California Commission rules, the promoter has technically staged his show when he calls up the first match and even if the rest of show is canceled, the rest of us had to be paid as well. The other wrestlers then asked me how to get their money, and I told them that, too. The next morning, all 14 wrestlers lined up outside the doors of the California Athletic Commission offices, including Mando Guerrero, my tag team partner who didn’t think my presence was good for the wrestlers. Well, good old Mando and I never made it to the ring, let alone tag off, but I was able to contribute something more profound to his week than just another meaningless *babyface* victory - a paycheck!

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Today, all these years later, I am told that the *boys* still talk about what Jim Wilson *did* to pro wrestling - or *for* pro wrestling, depending on your viewpoint - in 1985 when I went public in a series of nationally transmitted news stories about pro wrestling’s darkest secrets. Lots of people still remember (and curse) my appearance on ABC-TV’s *20/20*, but few know about the events that led to that broadcast or my role and motivation in several other wrestling exposés at about this time, and I want to start this

story with a complete account of that noisy year in pro wrestling history. I just want to be remembered - or forgotten - for the right reasons.

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"The truth," pronounced ABC-television reporter John Stossel, "is that pro wrestling is simply - *fake*!" With those harsh, uncompromising words, ABC's *20/20* began what it regarded as a historic exposé of professional wrestling's trade secrets and business and labor practices. I was one of two featured wrestlers (the other was Eddie Mansfield, as discussed shortly) in that exposé that was harder hitting than any ever published or broadcast. It had been awhile since wrestling's secrets were given national attention, and the wrestling industry was frankly worried: How deeply would *20/20* dig, and what would be the damage? Stossel didn't wait very long to rip into his topic with conviction and indignation. "Why does pro wrestling sell out all 22,000 seats in Madison Square Garden? That's something professional basketball and boxing don't often do!" Stossel sniffed.

Like so many other journalists and critics, Stossel was swept up with what some still regard to be one of the nagging metaphysical quandaries of the modern world: "Is this real sport?" he asked. "Are they really wrestling? Are they trying to win?" When Stossel asked the Iron Sheik (Hossein Khasrow Vasiri) if wrestling was fake, Iron Sheik snorted, "Come in the ring. I knock your head off. Or anybody else. My sport not phoney. Come in ring. I show you. Anything else?" Then Stossel introduced the only two fakers he could find who would answer his question. Wrestler Eddie Mansfield said, "No, it's not real, no. Not at all. I mean if someone believed that, they'd be stupid. The promoter comes in and says, 'Hey, I want it done this way.'" Finally, my turn came. Stossel said, "This is Jim Wilson, former All-American football player at the University of Georgia. Listen to Jim. Are the matches fixed?" And I replied, *"Every one of them is predetermined. Fixed. They decide who, when, what, where, why, how much and how long.."*

"Is the blood fake, too?" Stossel asked. Eddie Mansfield assured the audience that, contrary to the widespread belief about capsules, the blood is real. "The promoters want real blood. There's an expression for it - *red*

turns to green," Mansfield revealed. "Red *turns to green* means when you get blood, that turns into money. Real blood. There's no such thing as a blood capsule." Then *20/20* revealed how wrestlers prepare a razor fragment by wrapping it in tape and hiding it in their trunks or wristbands or mouth. That in the middle of a match, usually when the wrestler is outside the ring, the blade is covertly retrieved from its hiding place and used to open a cut, usually on the forehead. Mansfield explained that wrestlers do their own razor cuts because the opponent can't be trusted to do it carefully enough. Then he volunteered to demonstrate *blading.* Mumbling "God, I hate to do this," he calmly took the razor in his fingers. While an ABC camera zoomed in for a tight shot of Mansfield's face, Mansfield said, "Well, you take it out like that . . . and you go just like that." The thin crease across Mansfield's forehead filled with red and it trickled down toward the eyebrows. *20/ 20's* producers correctly calculated the visual effect of Mansfield's uncompensated bloodletting. The televised carving of Mansfield's forehead was intriguingly vulgar, and Stossel turned away in disgust. Mansfield sat quietly, letting his heart and capillaries perform.

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The obligatory topics of *working* and *blading* dealt with, *20/20* finally turned to what I regard as the *only* important issue raised by pro wrestling, and its only well kept secret: *the industry's illegal business practices and shoddy treatment of wrestlers.* Stossel introduced the topic this way: "Well, you might say, so what if it's fixed? These are still great actors and superb athletes working hard to put on a good show night after night. Well," Stossel continued, "the problem is that many ex- wrestlers say that this is a mean, dirty business."

Mansfield told about being blacklisted when, after performing for several years in California, Texas and Georgia, he began to talk publicly about how he and other wrestlers were treated as slaves with broken promises about pay, no medical insurance nor pensions. Eddie Mansfield became a troublemaker in the promoters' eyes, and they agreed among themselves to no longer employ him. "They ruined my career," he said.

“You know, I’m 28 years old. And it’s not like I’m over the hill. The promoters are very ruthless people. They don’t take care of the people that make them the money.” At this point, John Stossel explained the concept of *blacklistng* - “Its legal to fire someone who complains, but it’s not legal if all the employers band together to make sure someone they don’t like can’t work anywhere. That’s what’s happening in pro wrestling, according to many wrestlers.”

Then it was my turn again. “It’s a closed shop, totally closed and controlled. It’s the only business in this country today that is an illegal monopoly being allowed to exist. I wouldn’t go to bed with a homosexual promoter and they picked up the phone and I was blackballed. I was put out of The Business.” Stossel asked, “He said, ‘Sleep with me and I’ll make you champion’? But you didn’t, and so you’re out?” And I answered, “That’s right. I’m out.”

At that point, *20/20*s cameras switched to Stossel’s interview with wrestling promoter Vincent Kennedy McMahon, the well dressed, thick- necked Alfalfa lookalike from old *Our Gang* movies. Stossel said McMahon “denies even knowing about the razor blade business and he denies that he fixes matches,” but Stossel asked him to respond to our charges about wrestler mistreatment and blacklisting. Putting on his best *babyface,* McMahon replied, “I would say that, generally speaking, most of that is sour grapes. Certainly, something like that would never happen in the World Wrestling Federation [now, WWE], I assure you.” And it was left at that. By now, *20/20*s flimsy homework and fumbling inquiry was fully apparent. Stossel stumbled badly when he failed to ask McMahon the obvious followup questions - why no promoter outside McMahon’s own family had been permitted to stage wrestling shows in Madison Square Garden for over 30 years? And why McMahon paid arena managers and TV stations in several cities to grant him exclusive deals? And why two of his competitors sued him for antitrust violations and racketeering? And why he fired his former champion Bob Backlund who refused to turn *heel?* And why he ditched wrestler Sgt. Slaughter who asked for a cut of the royalties from sales of wrestling dolls in his likeness?

There was to be no aggressive journalism this night, and *20/20* proceeded to another, more sensational agenda - to broadcast a few minutes of videotaped *real* violence captured by ABC cameras at one of

McMahon's Madison Square Garden shows. Like so much in TV *and* pro wrestling, *20/20*s concluding minutes were unexpectedly ugly. The surprise *finish* began when 145 pound *babyface* Stossel interviewed wrestler Dave Shults, the six feet four, 255 pound *heel.* With cameras rolling, the exchange went like this: Stossel: "Is this a good business?"

Shults: "What?"

Stossel: "Is this a good business?"

Shults: "Yeah it is. I wouldn't be in it if it wasn't."

Stossel: "Why is it a good business?"

Shults: "Because only the tough survive! That's the reason you ain't in it, and this punk holding the camera, the reason he ain't in it! The reason these rednecks out here ain't in it! It's a tough business!"

After more back and forth, Stossel said: "I'll ask you the standard question. You know, I think this is a fake!" And Shults snapped, "You think it's fake?" Then, suddenly, Shults punched Stossel's right ear, shouting, "What' that? Is that fake? Huh? What the hell's wrong with you? That's an open hand slap. Huh? You think - ." Shults punched Stossel's other ear and as Stossel rolled on the floor, Shults stomped off down the hall.

The violent answer to Stossel's questioning outraged not only ABC's film crew, but many viewers. After the broadcast, more than 1,000 viewers called ABC-TV, asking about Stossel's condition. But inside The Business, pro wrestlers viewed the incident more cynically, certain that Shults' attack had been scripted by Vince McMahon (scripted or not, Stossel sued Shults and McMahon, and a New York court awarded him $400,000 two years later in 1987). When *20/20* finally ended, there was a collective sigh of relief inside the wrestling industry which had anticipated more damaging revelations. Frankly, so did I and so did Eddie Mansfield. Why? That *20/20* show didn't just suddenly appear from nowhere. There is an extensive backstage history to that famous edition of *20/20* that not many people know about, and the whole story should be told.

When Eddie Mansfield said, “God, I hate to do this” just before he *bladed* for ABC, he was verbally *working* - it was bullshit. Eddie Mansfield didn’t *hate* doing that, he’d been trying to get ABC-TV interested in doing a wrestling exposé for two years. He started writing to ABC in 1983, about a year after I met him. I’d never wrestled Eddie or even knew him, but he contacted me after I had filed lawsuits against the wrestling business. At the time, everybody in wrestling knew about my lawsuits, and Eddie wanted to know how to file his own suit, along with his friend and fellow wrestler and one hell of a football player Otis Sistrunk of the Oakland Raiders (from “the University of Mars”, said Dandy Don Meredith on ABC-TV’s *Monday Night Football).* But Eddie and Otis had no money to hire lawyers, which makes it difficult to sue somebody. I wasn’t very impressed with Eddie outside the ring. Although he’d come up from tough circumstances, adopted by elderly parents and raised in rural poverty without much schooling, I tagged him as just another one of the *boys* who got into wrestling for the bright lights, the dollies and the glory. Ultimately, nothing came of Eddie’s planned lawsuit, and I didn’t see him again until 1984 when a Georgia legislative committee investigated pro wrestling in Georgia. That investigation (as I discuss in more detail later) had made headlines in Georgia when several wrestlers (including Eddie and me) testified about the wrestling industry’s abuses, and Eddie faxed those articles up to *20/20* in New York along with a pitch letter: Eddie wanted *20/ 20* to do a wrestling exposé. But ABC-TV still wasn’t interested, and they stalled on Eddie’s proposal.

In the meantime, *Philadelphia Daily News* sportswriter Ray Didinger got wind of the Georgia wrestling investigation and the “disgruntled” wrestlers who testified. As an investigative sports reporter, Didinger’s critical eye had been caught by the paradox of *wrestling’s renaissance* in Philadelphia and elsewhere in the mid-1980s and at the same time, those Georgia wrestlers complaining about wrestling’s labor practices. When Didinger went to work on his own investigation, digging for hard facts concerning the inner workings of The Game, he ran into wrestling’s proverbial stone wall of secrecy. Nobody he contacted, including Bruno Sammartino, would talk to him - until he flew to Atlanta where he spent three days in a hotel room listening to Mansfield, wrestler Rock Hunter, ring announcer Jay West and me recite our experiences. And to document my own allegations, I showed Didinger several file boxes of court

documents, depositions and affidavits. Didinger was shocked by the stories we told him - “as bizarre as the sport itself,” he wrote later in a six-part report published by the *Philadelphia Daily News* and syndicated nationally by Associated Press Newsfeatures to nearly 200 subscriber newspapers having a combined circulation of about 14 million readers in late 1984. Oddly, Didinger’s series appeared in every metropolitan market of the country, *except one of the hottest wrestling markets anywhere - Atlanta.* Even a disinterested observer would wonder *how* and *why* that happened.

Didinger’s widely circulated wrestling investigation was a powerful indictment of the wrestling industry as *a business,* and that’s what ultimately convinced *20/20* to take Eddie Mansfield’s proposal more seriously. In retrospect, however, Didinger’s investigation was more probing and better researched than *20/20* because Didinger didn’t focus on fakery and blood - instead, he reported that although people have laughed at wrestling for years, the wrestling industry laughs harder on its frequent missions to the bank where hundreds of millions are deposited annually; *that despite its millions, most wrestlers are poorly paid and terribly treated;* and although professional wrestling is *worked,* its fans are surprisingly real, often becoming antagonized to the point of violence. By contrast, *20/20s* research was shallow and sloppy, although they spent a lot of money on videotape, taking hours and hours of film in Atlanta and Columbus, Georgia. When I showed *20/20* the same documents I gave to Ray Didinger, they weren’t interested. Nor did they do much research on their own: in all of its investigating, *20/20* failed to discover that at the very hour the show was broadcast, the wrestling industry was consumed by the roughest, dirtiest turf war in its long history of intramural squabbling, and that its principal figure, Vince McMahon, had recently raided other promoters’ wrestlers, TV stations and arenas in his nationalization of wrestling promotion. Nor did *20/20* bother to check with the U.S. Justice Department’s antitrust division that would have provided thousands of pages of documented evidence of *blacklisting* and athletic commission corruption going back to the early 1950s at ten cents a page.

What interested *20/20* most was wrestling’s *fakery* and *blade jobs,* and it was here where Eddie Mansfield asserted himself: because he had courted *20/20* for two years, Eddie wanted to take over the whole show, to *Bogart* the program. Unlike the rest of us, Eddie was more than willing to spill the

beans about *working.* Neither Rock Hunter nor I wanted to spill those beans. Rock said, “I ain’t gonna do that,” and I assured Rock that all I wanted to expose was the promoters’ injustice. I wasn’t interested in doing or saying anything that would alienate wrestlers because I wanted them on my side, and I didn’t want to kill spectator interest because I was still trying to promote on my own. But Eddie Mansfield didn’t look at it that way, and he took the cue and ran with it. Then *20/20* put me on the spot - *is it or is it not predetermined?* At that point, I had no choice but to answer the question. And by the time Rock Hunter and I drove down to Columbus, Georgia, where ABC got access to a wrestling ring for filming, Eddie had already taped his *blade job.* Then there was this: a week or so before *20/20* aired, I called one of the show’s producers to see if they had all the documents they needed to support claims about wrestler mistreatment. I was told they had all the paper they needed but, the producer said, they intended to hit the razor blade business hard.

Then the *20/20* guy told me they had videotape of David Shults decking John Stossel at Madison Square Garden, and they intended to show it. I said, “Oh, my God, that’s off the point - obviously, Shults was put up to it.” When I later relayed this news to Eddie Mansfield, Eddie was happy to learn *20/20* would hit the razor blade business hard but he was livid about the plan to show the Shults-Stossel incident; Eddie didn’t want them to show it because he thought that would be the only thing people would remember from the whole show, that it would take attention away from our revelations about wrestler mistreatment. I argued with Eddie, saying that showing Shults deck Stossel was going to reveal these assholes for what they really are; but Eddie was so angry he said he might sue ABC-TV (for what, I don’t know), saying he didn’t want to have anything to do with the *20/20* broadcast. Really, I think he was worried that Stossel- Shults would detract from his 15 minutes of bloody infamy.

Finally, days before the show aired, the same *20/20* producer told me that Vince McMahon’s attorneys had contacted ABC to say they were thinking about getting an injunction against airing the entire program, and, in any case, would be watching the show carefully for any hint at defamation. I guess that explained why Stossel was careful to emphasize that he had no *proof* of McMahon’s complicity in some of wrestling’s dirty little secrets. Unable or unwilling to do the hard work in pursuing the truth

about the wrestling industry's best kept secrets, Stossel focused his great probe on a stupid act that, while regrettable, was beside the point. Convenient sensationalism. Wrestlers call it *cheap heat.* From the wrestling industry's viewpoint, *20/20's* vision had been thankfully short-sighted.

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I watched *20/20* that evening with my six children and my wife Nita. For the eight of us, this evening was a kind of prime-time eulogy to our former life together. There was no laughter nor tears or visible reactions of any kind. It was very quiet - only private reckonings with Daddy's mistaken involvement in a mean and nasty business. And I think the kids were in a sense proud of me. Nobody teased them about it at school - "Your daddy is in a phoney business," like they used to. Although I was disappointed with how little *20/20's* shallow investigation uncovered, the show was a painful flashback to many years of frustrated hopes and crushed aspirations brought about by the wrestling industry's ruthlessness and lawlessness. And I sure didn't feel like a guy who was squealing on the system, as some have accused. I had kept quiet about wrestling's secrets for many years but finally defied the code of *kayfabe* publicly to *help* wrestling and wrestlers, not hurt them.

When the *20/20*broadcast ended that night, Eddie Mansfield called from his home in Columbus. "We hit 'em and banged them," he said. And he said he was looking forward to continuing our fight for wrestlers' freedom and dignity on other TV and radio shows. But I didn't much care what Eddie thought about *20/20;* I called my mother in Edgewood, Pennsylvania where she watched with my brothers, Toby and Bob and my sister Edie. I wanted to hear their reaction to the show. Until then, I had spared them the details of my wrestling experiences and the painful downward spiral from All-American football player and a successful career in the NFL. Now, I wanted reassurance that I had been vindicated and exonerated, and they each gave me that. National television finally explained to my mother and brothers and sister why I had fallen from football stardom to *disgruntled* pro wrestler.

In light of *20/20's* large audience, some industry spokesmen were appointed privately to neutralize the damage. One of these was Lou Thesz, a legendary figure in professional wrestling who first *won* the National Wrestling Alliance world championship in 1937 and held it longer than any wrestler in history. I did not know about the commissioning of Thesz until Eddie Mansfield and I arrived in Los Angeles to appear live on Lifetime cable television's *America Talks Back* show, about a week after *20/20.* I made the booking arrangements for the show, and when I told Eddie Mansfield they wanted us to elaborate on our revelations to ABC and to discuss them with viewers who would call in questions or comments, Eddie asked about money. Until now, we hadn't been paid anything for our interviews with either Ray Didinger or *20/20,* and I didn't expect payment. The only reward I sought was getting the nation's media to publicize pro wrestling's working conditions. But Eddie wanted to be paid, and so I got Lifetime cable to pay both of us $300 plus airfare and hotel expenses. Eddie wanted more, and he wanted special service. He wanted to be flown First Class from Columbus, Georgia to Hollywood and back because he did the *blade job* on *20/20,* but didn't get his blood money.

It was after we got to the Holiday Inn in West Hollywood when we were told that Lou Thesz would join the show via satellite from Nashville. At age 69, Lou was still wrestling! Of course, I knew Lou from years earlier when we traveled and wrestled together on some wrestling circuits, and I wrestled for his independent Nashville promotion in 1976 for which he still owed me money, now with interest added on. It turned out that Lou Thesz and Stanley Siegel, the show's host, were old friends from Nashville, where Siegel had broadcast a radio talk show years earlier.

America Talks Back opened with some videotaped replays from *20/ 20,* after which Siegel, looking confused and pained, turned to me asking, "Why are you spilling the beans? Aren't there certain cardinal rules? I love professional wrestling and I know you do, too. Isn't it like giving away the trick if you're a magician?" My answer reflected my ambivalence about the revelations to which I had now become publicly tied as a snitch. I said, "To

a certain degree it is. But we've been fans all our lives. Growing up as kids, we looked up to wrestling, you know, from a fan's standpoint. Then after we got into The Business - when they ruin your life, Stanley, and they ruin your wife's life and your children's lives and you lose everything that you were able to get for my family from football, and have it all taken away because they control and rig the business that's an illegal monopoly in this country - how long are we supposed to *protect the business? How long are we supposed to lie about it when they're killing us?"* Siegel looked sympathetic despite his affection for wrestling, and Lou Thesz didn't say anything. Then, Siegel invited Mansfield and me to demonstrate some wrestling maneuvers, to show how wrestling is *worked.* We obliged and threw each other around the studio for a few minutes, after which Siegel asked, in seriousness, "You still can get hurt, though, can't you? Lou Thesz used to tell me that you can't get cauliflowered ears from sleeping on hard pillows." Siegel wanted to know how many injuries I'd suffered being a pro wrestler. I wanted to talk about the *real* injuries in pro wrestling - *the manipulation of careers, the absence of pay scales and employee benefits, the use of blacklisting and violence to keep wrestlers inline* - but I sensed that Siegel had a fixation about Thesz's permanently swollen ears, a condition that I did not have because I never permitted my opponents to *work tight.*

After more arguing about whether pro wrestling was *worked,* Siegel asked about our respective careers in wrestling. Mansfield recounted his problems about promised money, but Siegel was more interested in my homosexual blackmail. After we both described our blacklisting, Siegel took the first of the evening's telephone calls from someone identified only as Ed from Georgia. The caller said he was a professional wrestler and that "these guys are telling the truth." Then Siegel asked if he'd been blacklisted. The caller replied, "Yeah I was - for the same reason Eddie Mansfield was: *standing up and asking for my money"* Siegel acted stunned as he asked, "Wrestling has been going on since Greco-Roman times and professional wrestling on TV has been with us all my life. *Why are we now hearing this story?'* Without pause, the caller replied, "*More guys are getting tired of it – the chokehold on them and losing everything they got and paying their dues and not getting anything back."*

After more calls and additional discussion about wrestlers' treatment, Siegel finally invited Lou Thesz to speak. "Lou, you've been at this sport since 1937 and before. Is professional wrestling fixed?" "No," Thesz answered without hesitation. "*Professional wrestling is not fixed.*. But the people that you were talking to Stanley, if I may interrupt, you were not talking to wrestlers. You were talking to a football player and what this fellow Mansfield did before he wrestled, I don't know. But neither of these people had done their homework in wrestling - neither one of these people have a wrestling background." Thesz continued, "And so far as someone telling you to lose a match - *if you're weak enough in your industry that you have to kowtow to a promoter and do whatever he wishes - lots of luck because you don't belong there*" Siegel interrupted Thesz, asking, "You're saying, in other words, that wrestling is *never* fake?" And Thesz sniffed, "I don't say *never.* Never say *never.* Uh, I think, over the years, wrestling is like everything else: all is not well with wrestling nor is all well with the world or with horse racing or anything else."

Siegel pursued Thesz, asking: "Can you give me an example of where it *might* be fake?" Thesz whined, "Well, if you get into the lower echelon, uh, wrestlers like the people you've been talking about, and they have not done their homework in a gymnasium with a wrestling coach, uh, these are carnival type people and they could probably do anything . . . And if they said they made a paltry amount of money, which is probably what they earned, why if a man devoted his life to it and knew what he was doing, he would have to be insane to do a thing like that." At this point the Lifetime studio in Hollywood heated up. Both Mansfield and I got angry by the manner in which Thesz denigrated our abilities and sincerity. Of course, we knew there were only a limited number of defenses available, the most convenient being a challenge to our credibility. Like all good wrestling shows, there was *heat.*

Mansfield spun around in his chair and angrily waved a wrestling magazine that had published his name as a top wrestler. He reminded Thesz he had been a main event wrestler and a champion in several states, and that Thesz actually was present the night in San Antonio when Mansfield was told to lose a *Hair Match* after which his head was shaved bald and his hair sold to fans for $2 a bag. Thesz played dumb, asking Mansfield if he had permitted the promoter to cut his hair and sell it. Mansfield told Thesz he

had no choice, and Thesz knew it. But Thesz pursued his attack. *"If you permitted them to do that, you'd better get yourself a shrink and get help - because you need help man*," sneered Thesz, now giggling. Thesz had always wrestled as a rough *babyface* - not quite a *heel,* but not a nice *babyface* either. But the direction that Thesz took the conversation surprised me. I didn't expect him to defend shaving of wrestlers' heads and merchandising their locks, but the increasingly personal attack on Eddie and me was not characteristic of the Thesz I had known. I decided to interrupt, and let Mansfield cool down from Thesz's smirking invitation to see a psychiatrist.

"Well, *everybody* in The Business needs help because *everybody's* doing it just exactly like we just showed you," I screamed. But Thesz angrily continued his attack: "I know about the background of you fellows, and you're a couple of *disgruntled* wrestlers that either want to rule or ruin. And you couldn't rule, so you want to ruin," he said. That remark was a subtle reference to the wrestling industry's code of silence, the code of *kayfabe,* which was now crumbling all around us. It was a reminder to both of us of pro wrestling's longstanding assumption that telling the truth about *worked* wrestling would ruin a good thing for everybody concerned. In retrospect, of course, that assumption turned out to be wildly wrong and it was probably the exposés of 1985 that finally convinced The Business that its code of *kayfabe* was unnecessary.

By now, all of the TV studio's telephones were lighted up and the place went bonkers. Siegel said the show had an audience of 25 million, and that's why the phones were stuffed with callers. And on the set, everyone was angry, especially Thesz who resumed his attack. "If people have talent and they are in a very good bargaining position because they have done their homework, they have no problem on income! But people of the stripe that you have there today, they'll never be in a bargaining position because people don't respect them! And some of these people don't show up for matches - which I am sure that Mansfield had done at times - it's a complaint I hear from promoters! *And Jim Wilson was never a wrestler!* I booked him for a couple of matches in Nashville, Tennessee where I met you Stan, and I couldn't use him anymore because the fellow just was inadequate! And how he ever dreams up the possibility that he would be a champion - *good Lord, champions are determined in the ring and unless a*

man is a wrestler and has done his homework, there's no way that he's going to make it! This is all pipe-dreaming and I don't understand!" I had enough of Thesz's denigration, and I responded emotionally and loudly. "Let me show you the pipe dream! Let me show you the pipe dream, America! Tune in right here! Here's my stripes," and I held up a T-shirt with the American flag on it and my wrestling reform campaign slogan - *All American Spirit - Freedom in Wrestling - RIGHT TO FIGHT,*" I continued, even louder, "*The stars and stripes forever! Home of the brave, land of the free! But not in professional wrestling!*"

With all this screaming, those viewers who had turned on their television sets late probably thought they were watching a replay of a typical Saturday wrestling show with a lot of *heel* interviews. After more shouting, Thesz snapped, “I just want to make a point here because every time I say something - I thought I was going to have a man-to-man and each person would be able to get his say. I’m really unhappy with your show, Stan. And we’re really good friends, but I am really displeased with what you’re doing . . . I expected more hospitality of you than this, I really did! Incidentally, Stan, I want to tell you something: your show is out of control and I want you to excuse me, please!” I told Thesz if he couldn’t take the heat to get out of the kitchen, and he did. Like *20/20*and all good wrestling shows, there was another surprise *finish:* Thesz stood up, disconnected his microphone and stalked angrily out of the studio.

After the show, Eddie and I went out for drinks in Santa Monica to kill time before our late plane back to Georgia. By now, Eddie was unhappy again. “Well, fuck, I wish I’d never gone out here with you,” he said. He complained that the show ended up like a wrestling promo and he hadn’t wanted that. He wanted to gentlemanly talk about all this stuff, and he castigated me for getting hot, especially for becoming angry with Lou Thesz. I told Eddie I felt I had to take that moment to get the point across about wrestlers’ mistreatment. I also told Eddie I knew a lot more about Lou Thesz than he did, referring to a few thousand pages of Justice Department files I had read (as is discussed later). But Eddie didn’t agree, and that’s the last I heard from Eddie Mansfield for awhile.

As for Lou Thesz, I never talked with him or saw him again. Nine years later, however, Lou published his autobiography *(Hooker, An Authentic Wrestler’s Adventures Inside the Bizarre World of Pro Wrestling),* and although he didn’t mention his *performance* that night with Eddie Mansfield and me on *America Talks Back,* he finally abandoned *kayfabe* in an awkwardly worded, qualified confession: *“The reality, or substance, of professional wrestling is the ability to perpetuate a fantasy... . it didn’t matter to me that professional wrestling was a performance*,” he wrote. Although seasoned wrestling fans understand that books written by wrestlers also are *performances,* Lou’s final attempt to *put himself over* (without pausing to acknowledge the hundreds of other pro wrestlers who didn’t get his *push* and did *jobs* for Lou) passed without critical comment;

the *gebronies* were *performers* but *authentic* Lou was the real deal - a genuine *shooting hooker.* Lou's book would have you believe he was *of* pro wrestling's world but not *in* it, although that is *not* what the 1950s Justice Department's investigation of the NWA shows about *shoemaker's* (Lou's secret codename in pro wrestling's earlier *kayfabed* days) pivotal role in helping the NWA crush promotional competitors, fixing other wrestlers' compensation and *blacklisting* those who complained (as discussed in more detail later). In short, Lou Thesz was no innocent stranger to pro wrestling's abuses and his autobiography *Hooker* leaves a lot to be said about that world, and how he prospered in it.

A few weeks after *20/20* and *America Talks Back*, a reporter from *Sports Illustrated* interviewed me about the claims I'd been making on national television. When *S-I* called, I was certain that another serious investigative report about wrestler mistreatment was underway. After all, *S-I* was the premier sports magazine located well outside the usual toy department approach of most mainstream sports journalism. Although *S-Is* stance toward pro wrestling had always been cautious—they didn't cover wrestling as real sport, but had occasionally published articles about prominent wrestling figures (such as Fabulous Moolah and Bruno Sammartino) to attract readers from sporting's fringe - it now seemed that *S-I* was ready to publish a substantive story about pro wrestling's dark underside of primitive working conditions. Which is why I spent several hours talking to *S-I* over several days and sent them packages of documents and court papers. And *S-I* didn't just take my word for it, they talked with Eddie Mansfield, too. But after awhile, I smelled trouble when the *S-I* reporter asked more questions about fakery and blood than the industry's genuine abuses, the things I wanted to talk about. My growing suspicion was confirmed a few weeks later when *S-Is* April 29, 1985 issue hit the newsstands with a cover that featured a photo of Hulk Hogan and a lengthy story entitled MAT MANIA. Putting Hogan on its cover surprised me (and many others) since only Danny Hodge, an old, retired pro wrestling *shooter* and legitimate amateur wrestler, had been there before; by contrast, Hogan

had no athletic credentials except selling wrestling tickets, and his *shooting* rep was known only to a Pennsylvania doctor and a few wrestlers who helped him inject *juice* (anabolic steroids, as court proceedings would prove a few years later). Inside its Hulk Hogan cover, S-I published a puff-piece for Vince McMahon's first *Wrestlemania,* another exercise in shilling. As a sidebar to its featured *Wrestlemania* valentine, *S-/* published a short two-column box entitled "What You See Is Not Always What They Get" that revealed the remarkable news that pro wrestling is *worked* and its blood flows from self-inflicted razor cuts; near the sidebar's end, two sentence fragments referred to my blacklisting "because he refused to engage in a homosexual act with a wrestling promoter." Once again, *fakery* and *blading* were of more interest to mainstream journalism than wrestling's *real* brutality, which just wasn't sexy enough.

By now, I was learning something new from journalists, an unhappy fact of life I hadn't thought was true, at least in this country: both ABC-TV's *20/20* and *Sports Illustrated,* each regarded as legitimate, mainstream bastions of objective journalism, actually behaved more like The Business in their manipulation of marketable *angles* and *highspots* to *sell* their respective products. Like other persons raised and educated in this country, I'd been taught to respect objective journalism and freedom's need for an independent, free press in a democratic society; now, however, I realized I'd been *conned* - it wasn't true. By comparison, pro wrestling's quirky integrity was less pretentious, but it was disturbing when I realized that much of this country's *objective* journalism is a *work,* too.

One interesting question that still hangs in pro wrestling's air today is what damage to The Business did Eddie Mansfield and Jim Wilson do in 1985? It's a question that Eddie and I talked about a few times during that year, and we sure didn't know what the ultimate result would be. My hope was that our joint media blitz would expose the wrestling promoters' wrestler mistreatment and show the need for a wrestlers' union and state athletic commission regulation. Oddly, the opposite seemed to happen: both Eddie Mansfield and Jim Wilson are today remembered as the two guys

who exposed *working* and *blading,* and both of us are still hated by some inside The Business for that.

In the weeks after *20/20,* The Business monitored wrestling fans' response to the exposés to which Mansfield and Wilson were now tied. Initially, wrestling promoters seemed to think our nationally transmitted *kayfabe* violations had either been missed or ignored by wrestling fans. Until one night at Atlanta's Omni Arena when wrestler Superfly Snuka (James Reiher) started to bleed all over the ring; all at once, hundreds of ringside fans chanted, *"Twenty-Twenty! Twenty-Twenty! Twenty- Twenty*!" The fans' not so subtle message was understood clearly by the wrestling industry. A week later, Tennessee promoter Jerry Jarrett and Oklahoma promoter Bill Watts told their wrestlers to lay off the *blade* for six weeks. But withholding the *blades* was not enough and a few weeks later, Minneapolis-based wrestling promoter Verne Charles Gagne (who started his own American Wrestling Association to become world champion) published a response to our allegations in his fan newsletter; Gagne, old enough to remember Herman Hickman's 1954 wrestling exposé in *Saturday Evening Post* with his photograph in it, said our allegations about pulled punches were "way out from the actual truth" and "how can anyone be so gullible to believe that a wrestler would actually carry a blade in his trunks, or worse yet, in his mouth" and "for anyone to claim that wrestling matches have predetermined outcomes is just as silly" and "there isn't a blackballing situation in pro wrestling," Gagne wrote.

But the Shults-Stossel incident remained in public view with reports about Stossel's impending lawsuit against Shults. When Stossel sued Shults, the national media kept the controversy alive; under pressure, the New York State Athletic Commission suspended Shults for 30 days. The longer the Shults- Stossel matter was newsworthy, the greater the impact of the program itself. The damage assessment measure that everybody in The Business was watching was attendance and gate receipts for Vince McMahon's big wrestling show on the eve of April Fools Day, 1985. On that night, the first *Wrestlemania* was staged in Madison Square Garden and transmitted live by satellite to about 190 other locations on the continent. That single event generated $12 million, according to Vince McMahon; others put the figure closer to $5 million. Whichever it was, *Wrestlemania* was the largest and richest professional wrestling show in history - *just*

weeks after wrestling's most recent exposé was transmitted nationally! The juxtaposition of these events and the magnitude of their respective audiences speaks volumes about wrestling's hold: the wrestling fans' response to the exposés was unambiguously clear - Ring the bell and kick some ass! Or, in the language of a famous wrestling aphorism, *I don't care if it is fake, kill the son of a bitch!!*

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Four years later in 1989, pro wrestling's longstanding tradition of *kayfabe* was *officially* abandoned in New Jersey legislative hearings by Mrs. Vincent Kennedy McMahon, wife of the man whose World Wrestling Federation (WWF) now dominated the American wrestling industry. Unwilling to commit the industry's fatal act of treachery himself, McMahon deputized his attorney-spouse Linda to tell at least some of the truth —to *shoot* selectively when it was in McMahon's interest to do so. As part of McMahon's campaign in the late 1980s to lobby state legislatures into deregulating pro wrestling (because regulation was costing McMahon a percentage of live gates, TV revenue and allegedly, in some states, under-the-table bribes), McMahon commissioned a truth-telling assault on New Jersey's State Athletic Control Board which had jurisdiction over Atlantic City's Trump Plaza - the site of *Wrestlemania IV* and V The New Jersey Control Board's tax on closed circuit and pay-per-view telecasts and video replay distribution was costing McMahon plenty. When New Jersey held hearings on the proposed deregulation of wrestling a few weeks before *Wrestlemania V* at Trump Plaza, Linda McMahon's confession that pro wrestling was "an activity in which participants struggle hand-to-hand *primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest"* made headlines on the front page of *The New York Times* the next day: *NOW IT CAN BE TOLD: WRESTLING ALL IN FUN.* The story was wired around the nation - "Promoters of professional wrestling have disclosed that their terrifying towers in spandex tights, massive creatures like Bam Bam Bigelow, Hulk Hogan and Andre The Giant, are really no more dangerous to one another than Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy."

Now that wrestling's inspirational fiction was *officially* out of the closet, the *New York Post* elaborated on Linda's confession the following day when it reported she previously testified in comedian Richard Belzer's personal injury lawsuit against Hulk Hogan that pro wrestling promoted and advertised "scenes, scenarios, interplays, actions, feuds, grudges, friendships and associations which further enhance the illusion that professional wrestlers are indeed the characters they play and perform." The *Post* also revealed Vince McMahon's testimony in John Stossel's lawsuit that wrestling matches were *prearranged* by either him or one of his agents.

Surprised by press reaction to his own family's *kayfabe* violations, McMahon ordered his wrestlers to cancel all media appearances, except for those interviews he could control. Then McMahon launched a PR-campaign to clean up the damage, starting with an appearance on ABC-TV's *Good Morning America* show by Roddy Rowdy Piper; Piper said McMahon was just lying about wrestling's fakery to get the athletic commission off his back. Days later, Jesse "The Body" Ventura, then one of McMahon's TV announcers (eventually Minnesota Governor) was booked for an interview on ESPN with sportscaster Roy Firestone; Jesse said, "I think the press is missing the whole point. It's a little known fact that in many states, you have 14 guys in suits sitting around the ring and doing absolutely nothing." Jesse said some athletic commissioners were paid kickbacks off the top of regulation fees, and "The WWF is willing to do *anything it can* and say in order to get these ridiculous commissions off their backs." Then the future governor issued the old, hollow offer to step into the ring with anyone who doubted wrestling's legitimacy.

Elsewhere in the wrestling industry, telephone lines burned for about 72 hours. McMahon's promotional competitors tried to capitalize on McMahon's possible miscalculation. In Memphis, promoter and world title claimant (and later, McMahon's TV announcer)Jerry Lawler used his weekly TV show to respond: "See, I told you that kind of stuff Vince McMahon's been doing up in New York wasn't wrestling!" When Minnesota promoter Verne Gagne was asked by *The New York Times* for his reaction, he also played dumb. He said: "They've got a cartoon going there . . . It's a circus. And a lot of 'em don't even know how to wrestle. Some are just bodybuilders, and some puffed themselves up with steroids." Gagne added, "I once asked Hulk Hogan what his athletic background was. He

said, ‘Oh, I played some Little League baseball, and played the guitar in my high school band.’ *And he calls himself a wrestling champion!’* Shortly afterward, Ted Turner’s TBS wrestling show promised, “These are *real* rasslers - *they are under a commission*!” When Michael Hayes (Mike Seitz) said that on the national airwaves, I paid closer attention: a commission? An athletic commission in Georgia? Are you kidding? I had spent many years trying to establish athletic commission regulation of pro wrestling in Georgia, and it certainly had *not* yet arrived! But deception and false advertising certainly were not new to wrestling, as was proven when Turner’s TBS introduced a new promotional tag line: “This is the NWA - *We Wrestle!’* The intended inference was clear: McMahon’s World Wrestling Federation faked it, but the others didn’t.

When another legislative hearing on wrestling deregulation was held in Washington state a few weeks later, the proceedings made front page headlines in Seattle when McMahon’s minions pointed out that Washington’s athletic commission rules prohibited referee involvement in wrestling scripts and stunts, an utter impossibility in *worked* wrestling matches. Again, the news media’s sniggering critics hadn’t had such fun with wrestling since four years earlier in 1985 when Eddie Mansfield and I told secrets on *20/20.* Which is why ABC-Television’s *Nightline* called me in March 1989, asking for an interview. “It’s the hottest story on the East Coast,” said Ted Koppel’s producer. And I guess they really thought so because for the better part of a week, an ABC film crew flew around the country taping interviews with wrestling industry figures and *Nightline* devoted a whole program to pro wrestling’s deregulation one night in March 1989. The show featured a debate between California state legislator Richard Floyd, who sponsored a bill to deregulate wrestling in California, and ex-wrestler and manager Captain Lou Albano, who had told ABC’s producers he would vouch for McMahon’s contention that all pro wrestling was fake. But then, Albano suddenly changed his *finish* halfway through the show when he argued that *only McMahon’s wrestling was fake.* Confused by Albano’s unexpected answers, ABC’s Jeff Greenfield repeatedly asked Albano about wrestling’s fakery. Albano dug his heels in: “If McMahon says his wrestling is fake, it probably is, but the NWA and AWA are moving back to the real basics of wrestling,” he said. Why did Albano stiff ABC? You don’t have to be a wrestler to figure it out - Lou grabbed the opportunity to appear on *Nightline* to push and hype his own 900-numbered

telephone wrestling news hotlines. And he was willing to *shoot* any *angles* necessary to build up an audience with an appearance on *Nightline.* The network got conned by one of wrestling's masters, and it was amusing.

Then recent history repeated. Just as the *20/20* exposé of pro wrestling in 1985 insured the commercial success of the first *Wrestlemania,* the revelations of 1989 produced immediate rewards at arenas around the country. In the week after the New Jersey hearings, McMahon's WWF wrestling cards had a string of big gates - sellouts in Boston, Utica, New Haven, St. Louis and at the Met Center in Minneapolis. And three weeks after *Nightline's* great wrestling probe, *Wrestlemania* ^unfolded as planned; everybody who was supposed to win, did. Wrestling fans paid $25 million to watch Hulk Hogan regain the WWF world wrestling championship. That same night, Ted Turner programmed a predatory NWA wrestling show on TBS, drawing an audience of 5 million viewers, producing hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue for Turner. It was again the biggest, noisiest and richest night in the industry's history.

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That people will spend money to watch "the moral equivalent of talking mules," as sportswriter Ray Didinger put it, strikes some as a paradox of rationality that is explicable only by reference to wrestling fans' collective dementia. Among wrestlers, there is an old insiders' riddle that asks, "What has 14 teeth and an IQ of 50?" Answer: "The first 10 rows of any wrestling crowd." But any fan of wrestling is a friend of mine. I happen to like wrestling's fans, and I don't join others who denigrate their interest or use unflattering adjectives to characterize their intelligence, social status or cultural sophistication. After all, the patrons of wrestling performances more often get their money's worth than the patrons of legitimate sport. There is a sense in which wrestling fans are the most discriminating audience - obviously, an evening of wrestling *should* be entertaining because it is specifically designed to be so. As sportswriter Red Smith wrote in 1954, "It has been years since anybody seriously pretended that rassling was anything more than good, unclean fun . . . there is a rich, crunchy goodness about this whole business that is all too seldom present in

children's games like basketball, football, golf, tennis and hockey which fill so much of the sports section."

Perhaps I respect and defend wrestling fans because I've been one since I was a pre-teenager growing up in Edgewood, Pennsylvania, a Pittsburgh suburb. I regarded pro wrestling as not just physically interesting, but compelling story-telling. A good wrestling match is one that has plenty of action with spectacular maneuvers performed by charismatic personalities. But the most engaging matches are those that *tell a story,* complete with premise, plot and climactic conclusion. When I became a pro wrestler, I learned a lot more about wrestling's appeal, and how it is produced. But before I was a wrestler, I was a fan. In the 1950s the big wrestling names in Pittsburgh were Dr. Jerry Graham, Jack Vansky, Jack Dillon, Skull Murphy, Bill Miller, The Great Scott and Buddy Rogers. And Primo Carnera, Johnny Valentine and Antonino Rocca. Mostly I remember Two Ton Tony Galento. One night on television, Tony came out for his interview and talked about milk. "Drink milk!" Tony said. Then his opponent came out and snarled, *"The hell with that milk, drink beer!"* In the late 1950s, that was *edgy* TV programming.

I didn't follow TV wrestling every week, and attended only two arena shows in all those schoolboy years. The first time I went to a wrestling match was when I was in junior high school. One year at Christmastime, a group of us guys ended up at the wrestling matches in Swissvale, a Pittsburgh suburb, in an old movie theater. The main event was a handicap match between Haystacks Calhoun and two other guys and the match ended when all three wrestlers got knocked out. It was a bullshit *finish,* and I didn't believe it, but I was curious and attracted to it, the odd combination of athletics and show biz.

Then in 1960, during a visit home from the University of Georgia, I discovered someone named Bruno Sammartino was wrestling in Pittsburgh. I had flipped on channel 11, WIIC-TV (now, WPXI) for the wrestling show, and there he was. Bruno. I knew this guy. He had been a casual acquaintance and a personal hero of sorts from earlier days when we became acquainted at the gym in the Young Men's Hebrew Association across the street from the University of Pittsburgh campus. I wasn't entirely surprised to see Bruno in a wrestling ring because the last time I talked with him he was pumping iron at the Jewish Y. When I was in my early teens, I

was on the swimming and basketball teams at the Jewish Y. In time, I started going into the weight room, working out with some of the other guys. That's when I met Bruno who was often there with a few friends who spotted for him. He was incredible, lifting 500 pounds. And when Bruno was working out, the rest of the guys just stopped and watched Bruno lift everything in the room. He attracted a lot of attention because he was a little, big man - relatively short at five feet ten but wide as a house with a 58- inch chest. Which was remarkable for someone who weighed 90 pounds when he immigrated with his family from Italy in the early 1950s. On a few occasions, I'd walk over to ask him how many reps he was doing or what weights he was using, and he politely answered my questions. Later, Bruno got into bodybuilding, once winning the Mr. Pittsburgh title.

But I didn't know Bruno had gotten into wrestling; when I last saw him, he was an *apprentice* carpenter. And could Bruno wrestle! After lumbering into the ring, it didn't take long for his opponents to submit to Bruno's bearhug. A lot of people around Pittsburgh went nuts over their new hero. They had the Pirates, the Steelers, the Penguins and the Pitt Panthers. And now, Bruno. In Pittsburgh, some of our neighbors placed Bruno's photograph on their fireplace mantel next to a picture of Jack Kennedy and a painting of *The Last Supper.* On one occasion I saw Bruno wrestle at the Pittsburgh Civic Center. It was my second live wrestling show, and would be the last until I wrestled in one. It was a winter night in 1962 when I was again home from college and my boyhood friend Ronnie Silverstein got some free wrestling tickets from his dad, who was superintendent of schools. The main event was a feud match between Bruno and Gorilla (Robert Marella) Monsoon, later an announcer on McMahon's TV wrestling shows, and we had seats on the arena floor about halfway back. While Ronnie followed the ring action, which he thought was a cartoon for adults, I was studying the audience - how it reacted to what was going on in the ring. The arena had a noisy carnival atmosphere, smelling of beer and popcorn and although the wrestling wasn't real, the spectators were having fun acting as if it were. Behind me, one fan said, "Well, I saw a match onetime, a no way that coulda' been fake!" I turned around and looked at the guy. I don't remember who won that night, but even then I knew that whoever was supposed to win, did.

I casually followed Bruno's career from a distance as he conquered the northeastern wrestling territory, ultimately defeating Buddy Rogers in 1963 at Madison Square Garden for one of pro wrestling's world championship titles. With a backbreaker, another Bruno finishing hold, he forced Rogers to submit 47 seconds into the match! (at the time, I didn't know that Rogers had been previously hospitalized for a heart attack and needed to get out of wrestling that night in a hurry). Two years later, I had dinner with Bruno after my All-American season at the University of Georgia. We were seated together at Pittsburgh's annual Dapper Dan Banquet, where athletes are honored annually. The Penn State football coach Rip Engle was there, as was his 1964 All-American and now College Hall of Fame player Glenn Ressler. I was introduced as *The Pittsburgh* Bulldog (Georgia's mascot is the bulldog). Across the table was Rocky Marciano, the former world champion boxer who retired undefeated. Over rubber chicken and cold peas, the three of us exchanged smalltalk, and I told Bruno I was thinking about a career in pro wrestling after I finished pro football. Bruno looked up at my six foot four frame and between gulps of chicken and peas said, "Jim, you've got everything to make it. Let me know if I can do anything to help you."

When I finally began wrestling professionally several years later during the pro football off-seasons, Bruno was still champion, and he didn't lose his belt until the year I retired from pro football and began wrestling full time. Our paths in wrestling never crossed, but by the late 1970s both Bruno and I encountered difficulties with how the wrestling industry was treating us. By then, Bruno was frequently losing his matches and arguing about broken promises over pay and a *push* for his son who wanted to follow his father into The Game; in my case, I'd been placed on wrestling's blacklist because I refused to lose after some other broken promises. Bruno threatened to blow the whistle on the industry, but I didn't just threaten. Ultimately, we were both involved in prolonged struggles with wrestling promoters over our treatment.

Our respective disputes with the wrestling business were unrelated, but Bruno's problems with Vince McMahon played a subtle role in my involvement with Ray Didinger's 1984 wrestling exposé. When Didinger came to Atlanta to talk with me and other Georgia wrestlers about our experiences, he said he'd previously contacted Bruno Sammartino for

inside information after learning Bruno was so angry about his treatment he was ready to spill the beans. But Bruno suddenly solved a contract problem and got a job for his son David with Vince McMahon, and had told Didinger he didn't want to talk. That's why Didinger came to Atlanta - because Bruno wouldn't talk. I suppose if Bruno had been willing to spill his guts to Ray Didinger, I would never have been interviewed by him nor by *20/20* nor *America Talks Back* or *Sports Illustrated*. Life takes funny turns, especially in pro wrestling. Bruno's choice to remain silent is hard to understand: instead of using his celebrated wrestling status to speak out about wrestling's abuses and help not just his son but other wrestlers, including those who *put* him *over* for many years, Bruno elected to keep quiet. Nor did Bruno discuss these matters a few years later when he published an autobiography whose main purpose was to *put over* his living legend wrestling persona. Like Lou Thesz and others, Bruno seems to believe his own hype. Wrestling does funny things to people.

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Outside The Business, reactions to my whistle-blowing in 1984 and 1985 seemed positive, and my story touched some hearts. An Omaha boys club counselor asked for reprints of the Didinger series for distribution to kids because "any of the boys follow wrestling with an obsession. I don't want to take away something they enjoy. I want to make them aware of the phoniness behind it and the reasoning for it - profit." On the streets of Atlanta, a black woman walked up to me and said, "When you gonna rassle again, Big Jim?" Another wrestling fan wrote that after watching TV wrestling for 14 years, "I have seen the light of day of this sport or show (or) whatever you call it . . . tell Mansfield and Wilson I believe in them and hope by writing to you something could be done to help pro wrestlers get what is theirs. Mansfield and Wilson, I wish you both the best of luck."

But of all the personal responses to my involvement in the great exposés of 1984 and 1985, one was more touching in its pain and pathos than any other. After the *20/20* show, I received a long letter from an old and broken wrestler from the 1950s and 1960s. He had worked under various names - Ed Gardenia, Daniel Boone Savage, Eddie Fay, The

Golden Terror and Gypsy Moe - but his real name was Eddie Faieta. Eddie's letter was the first of many that Eddie wrote to me for many years after, on those days he felt well enough and could see his own handwriting. As our correspondence continued, he asked for postage stamps and I sent him a large supply; when he wrote that it was becoming difficult for him to see well enough to write and read, I called him, and we talked on the telephone monthly for several years afterward.

Eddie Faieta was not only hardscrabble poor, but seriously sick with diabetic nephropathy, a kidney and bladder disorder associated with diabetes. He had lost one eye and was losing sight in the other. He now lived alone in a small apartment on Sixth Street in Steubenville, Ohio where he survived on Medicaid so long as his savings account didn't exceed $1,800. One of his neighbors who helped Eddie with groceries and doctors appointments told me that oldtimers in the Italian neighborhood still talked about him in hushed reverence at a local bar where an old photograph of Eddie still hung on the wall. In the 1950s, Eddie was one of Steubenville's young street kids who left for the big cities and made a name for himself. When Eddie became a pro wrestler and appeared on TV, his Steubenville pals thought he had made it big. He became a local ethnic hero to Italian kids like Joe Scalise, who now looked after Eddie. But after giving 17 years of his life to The Business, he became one of its tragic casualties. Eddie's story, I learned later, was typical of most retired wrestlers; unlike most others, however, Eddie was willing to tell it.

Eddie came to pro wrestling from boxing, where he had been a sparring partner for Billy Conn of Pittsburgh, the light heavyweight boxing champion in 1939 and 1940. Eddie started wrestling in 1949 after a friend told him, "if you're big with a good body and athletic enough to do a somersault, you should be in wrestling." Eddie's first match was in Louisville, where promoter Al Haft used him to replace an injured wrestler. "I wrestled Roughhouse Don Evans. Evans knew it was my first match, but he was very kind. He said, 'Don't get excited when you're in the ring. Let me do the leading and I'll talk to you and you just listen, and we'll have a good match. And that's just what happened, and they paid me $50. I thought, 'My goodness, if it's going to be this easy, I'll make $300 a week for six nights work' - which was a lot of money in those days," Eddie said. The match with Evans launched Eddie Faieta on a career that took him

throughout the country and around the world, although he would rarely be permitted to win. Eddie became a career *carpenter* (in those days, *gebronies* were called *carpenters* - guys whose role was to build up other wrestlers).

When Eddie wrestled in New York, he struck a special relationship with promoter Joe "Toots" Mondt. "Since I grew up on the streets in the Italian neighborhood in Steubenville, I knew what was going on in every town - where to find the girls, the gamblers, whatever. Toots liked that, and I drove him to prostitutes and racetracks. He liked women, and he made deals with the wrestlers: their wives for a *push.* But he loved gambling more, and although he was a clever guy, gambling was his downfall. He was rich one day and poor the next. After a bad day at the track, he'd say, 'Well, there'll be a little less money for the *boys* this week,' and then sit back and laugh like W. C. Fields. I saw the abuses at the beginning, but I wasn't able to do anything about it. If wrestlers squawk, they don't work. And if they start talking union, they're gone. Or, refusing to lose. If you didn't lose when you were supposed to, they'd put you in with a *shooter.* Al Haft used Joe Scarpello as a strong arm guy. If you complained to Haft about losing or about *payoffs,* he'd say, 'Your next match is with Scarpello - it's up to you.' I was just tickled to be working. Even as just a preliminary guy," Eddie said.

Knowing The Business liked to exploit ethnic stereotypes, Eddie wondered why his own Italian credentials didn't get him a *push,* especially in the northeast. "Antonino Rocca had become a big name for Toots Mondt, and was selling out everywhere. Then Rocca wanted more money and Mondt told him, 'Don't think you're the only Italian champion - we can make another Italian champion just as quick as we made you.' So Mondt got Bruno Sammartino." Eddie said he met Bruno a few years earlier in Pittsburgh at channel 11 studios during tapings of area wrestling shows. "Bruno used to come there, asking 'How do you get involved in this business?' I didn't tell him too much, but he kept coming around. Finally, he was offered a contract. His first match was in Ambridge, a town in western Pennsylvania not far from Pittsburgh. It was a sellout, mostly Italians, for a match with Tiger Jack Vansky. Vansky was the best *carpenter* in The Business - he could make a telephone pole look good. Then they got others to make him look good and they finally put him on TV and took him to New York. Of course, he got a big Latin *pop* in New York and was a big

moneymaker for years. Bruno got 5% of the gates in Pittsburgh, but most of the other wrestlers didn't have the guts to squawk about what they got," Eddie said.

In the meantime, Eddie continued his career as a prelim wrestler, "just a guy whose job was to make other guys look good," he said. "I never got a break, and don't know why. Maybe it was jealousy - maybe the other wrestlers knocked me down, bad-mouthed me. *Wrestlers are just like prostitutes - they'll do whatever they have to do to make money"* Eddie said.

One of the biggest matches of Eddie's career came in the summer of 1953 when he wrestled as Gypsy Moe against Gorgeous George (George Wagner) in a main event at the Tacoma Ice Arena for local promoter Paavo Ketonen. "George was a very nice guy and a good legitimate wrestler, but he had a real drinking problem. He was usually drunk in the ring, but he was a great showman and he got tremendous *heat* for 15 minutes before we even touched each other. I followed instructions and lost. The show was a sellout - over 6,000 people and I got $125. George got a guarantee plus a percentage, probably $500 for that show, maybe more." Gorgeous George died in 1963, broke and without a functioning liver.

But Eddie's main events were few, even in tank towns like Tacoma. By the early 1960s, Eddie became fatalistic about his wrestling career. "I was upset about my *payoffs* and being beaten every night. I was always told, 'Take a loss in 15 minutes.' I'd offer to help out in the office by putting up posters and doing interviews for radio stations, and they'd give me gas money. I had no education and no mechanical skills. I felt that this was all I could do. I was a mediocre wrestler but I never got a break, never got the push." Eddie went to Europe where he wrestled in England, France and South Africa. In South Africa, he wrestled as Daniel Boone Savage "from the hills of West Virginia" for which he was told to grow a beard, not to bathe and tell newspaper reporters he refused to sleep in hotels; he was required to pose for pictures with a brick in one hand (his pillow) and a handful of raw meat in the other. The stupid *gimmick* produced sellouts and Eddie became a wrestling sensation in South Africa, earning 12% of the gates for the first and last time in his wrestling career.

But Eddie's glory days didn't last long. After injuring his knees, he took a few months vacation in Italy where he rested and ate pasta. By the

time Eddie returned to the Steubenville in 1966 for knee surgery, he was overweight and out of shape, and decided to retire from the ring and go into wrestling promotion. “I opened a wrestlers’ training school in Steubenville and trained several wrestlers but I couldn’t get them booked because I wasn’t a member of the [National Wrestling] Alliance. I attended one of the NWA’s annual meetings, but they wouldn’t let me in. I tried to promote in Steubenville, Wheeling and Pittsburgh, but the NWA tangled me up in a bind: when I got some talent together, they blocked the arenas and TV stations; when I got access to the arenas, they wouldn’t give me wrestlers. Finally, I asked them to give me just one town and I’d promote for the NWA. They said they didn’t need any more local promoters in the area.”

Finally, Eddie left wrestling and settled for oddjobs, working as a masseuse and security guard. For awhile, he worked as a bouncer at P. J. Clarkes, the New York nightclub where he met an Italian movie casting director who thought Eddie’s heavyweight looks were film material. Eddie went back to Italy where he played bit parts in 27 spaghetti westerns, one of which was the jailer in *The Count of Monte Cristo,* his only film shown in the United States. After his movie career, he returned home and moved to Las Vegas where he again tried to promote wrestling in 1981 at the Showboat Casino. Using the name Eddie Fay and with help from old wrestling friends - Chief Big Heart (Richard Vest), Antone “Ripper” Leone and Joe Blanchard - he organized the first Vegas wrestling promotion in ten years and got Lou Thesz, then an NWA *outlaw,* to work as referee for one show. But when news of Eddie’s Las Vegas promotion spread, Verne Gagne put an end to his TV and Showboat contracts. Afterward, Eddie returned to Steubenville, broke and sick.

Eddie shared these details of his life in wrestling after his initial letter to me in 1985 when we began regular communication with phone calls and more letters. And although I never met the man, face- to-face, we developed a genuine friendship. Eddie was always interested to hear the latest news about my efforts to clean up the wrestling business, something he felt strongly about, and I kept him up to date. Eddie often said, “Jim, I’m dying, but I hope and pray that you can carry this thing forward.” And I sensed that my calls to Eddie were a lifeline for him - although he was very sick, his spirit seemed to just pick up when we talked about a wrestlers’ union. By 1988, he was living on a monthly Social Security check of $313.62. He

was having a hard time making ends meet, and he was angry. *"It's difficult - this is all I get to live on after all my years in wrestling"* he wrote on one occasion. Eddie had been hurt so badly by The Business, his only remaining ambition was to help me organize a union for wrestlers. Like me, Eddie had let pro wrestling's labor situation get under his skin. And after it gets under your skin, it can crawl into your heart. I understood that, which was the essential core of our friendship.

I learned a lot about pro wrestling's earlier days from Eddie's stories about The Business in the late 1940s and 1950s, about people he'd known and his experiences with them. Although Eddie realized nobody in wrestling today remembered him, I could tell from the wrestling names he dropped that he'd been around a lot of prowrestling's ugly history. His stories were sprinkled with references to promoters Jack Pfefer, Jess McMahon and Jim Barnett and wrestlers Chief Don Eagle, Mike (Baron Michelle) Leone, Lou Thesz, Rikidozan, Verne Gagne, Chief Big Hart (who knocked out Gagne's teeth) and Jose "Pepper" Gomez, who Eddie *put over* in Pepper's first match in Visalia, California because "nobody else would." During one of our long phone conversations, Eddie said he had a friend outside wrestling who could help me organize a wrestlers' union. Eddie's friend was a *wiseguy* named Vito (not his real name), then living inside a prison in Marion, Illinois, but Eddie said Vito would help organize a union for pro wrestlers when he got out of the slammer. Talking in code, Eddie told about Vito's line of work, which was the reason he was in prison: Vito had taken a fall for some other Steubenville mobster. Another *fallguy*, we joked privately. I told Eddie I didn't like the idea of dealing with a gangster, but Eddie said, *"Hey, if the mob gets behind us, it's a done deal"*

I thought about Eddie's advice for awhile and finally agreed. While Vito was still in prison, Eddie sent me newspaper clippings about Vito's collegiate football career at a small school in the Midwest. Eddie was trying to soften me up about Vito, and he succeeded. When he said that Vito had played football, I told Eddie, "Hey, if the mob wants to be part of the deal, I don't give a shit." A few months later, Vito got out of prison and Eddie gave me his new phone number. I called Vito one night, and the conversation was memorable. In an unfriendly baritone out of the *Godfather* movies, Vito whispered, *"Don't ever call me again,"* and he slammed down the phone. When I told Eddie about my call to Vito a few

days later, he was surprised. And disappointed because he'd been certain his connections with the Steubenville mob would help us start a wrestlers' union. When Eddie recommended I not contact Vito again, I didn't.

At that point, Eddie seemed to feel he'd done all he could do to help me reform wrestling by establishing a wrestlers' union, and he encouraged me not to give up. Eddie's interest continued, sensing that I had taken this fight further than anybody, and he knew how rare it was for wrestlers to talk back to promoters by demanding just treatment and to understand legal issues by filing lawsuits and advancing the cause openly on radio and TV. As an unskilled and uneducated guy, Eddie was impressed with what I was trying to do and encouraged me to do something else that I hadn't thought about: *writing a book* about the hidden underside of pro wrestling, a book that might update Eddie's well-worn copy of Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys, The Barnums of Bounce* published about 50 years earlier in 1937. Until Eddie mentioned it, I'd never heard of Griffin's book and Eddie explained why - Toots Mondt had enough power and money to buy most of the copies of the first and only printing. After a few months of searching, I finally located a copy through inter-library loan, and then I understood why Eddie liked it so much. *Fall Guys* was one of Eddie's prized possessions - he often said there wouldn't be much of his personal property to give away after he died, but his copy of *Fall Guys* would be written into his will as a bequest to Jim Wilson.

Eddie Faieta and I exchanged more letters and phone calls for several more years. But when I last talked to Eddie, he had recently returned from a week of medical tests at a Pittsburgh hospital. The results were bleak, he said, and he was looking for a nursing home that would take someone in his financial situation. In a now quieter voice, he said he didn't want to talk anymore - "I'm ready to meet the Lord," Eddie mumbled. I didn't hear from Eddie again, and a few months later his telephone at 815 North 6th Street in Apartment 512 was disconnected. I learned later from the Social Security Administration that Eddie Faieta died on September 18, 1993, four months before his 65th birthday. Wanting to know more about Eddie's final days, I called his pastor at the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church who said Eddie was so destitute at the end that one of his old girlfriends buried him in a Steubenville cemetery. There was no mention of his death in local newspapers or anywhere else in the wrestling industry's newsletters.

Eddie Faieta's promised copy of *Fall Guys* never arrived, but Eddie's spirit still lives within me. As Eddie realized, the great wrestling exposés of 1985 *only* chipped away at the code of *kayfabe* - too limited by the news media's peculiar economy of space and time and fascination with *working* and *blading* to get their arms around the whole story. As Eddie and a few others knew, there is a lot more under pro wrestling's mask than was seen by those who thought they stripped wrestling to its naked core. To finally put an end to *all* of wrestling's secrets protected by the code of *kayfabe*, much remains to be told, and I turn to that now.

Sadly, Eddie Faieta isn't here to hold in his hands the book he inspired. Nor are countless other former wrestlers whose names once lighted up arena marquees but were used and abused by the ruthless industry described in these pages. Many pro wrestling performers from yesterday died in illness and poverty, and others are alive today but struggling in great need. The stories in this book are told in memory of these forgotten men and women whom I never met but know very well.

Chapter 2

R E Q U I E M F O R A N A L L - A M E R I C A N

WHEN I WATCHED the movie *Requiem For A Heavyweight* I was touched by this poignant tale of a washed up pug's slide into the demeaning career twilight of Indian Chief wrestler. It is an insightful film with great performances by Jackie Gleason, Julie Harris, Anthony Quinn and Mickey Rooney. At the time, I didn't know the film came several years after a Rod Serling play of the same name, and was based loosely on boxer Joe Louis' controversial entry into pro wrestling in the mid-1950s. Joe Louis was too old to fight and too indebted to the IRS to stop, and sportswriters had no choice but to headline their stories with a disapproving *Say It Ain't So, Joe.* But when I saw the movie, I didn't realize that *Requiem* presented some uncomfortably close imagery of my own future.

There are exceptions to the *Requiem* scenario in which an accomplished athlete sells both his talent and dignity to the greed of the wrestling business for nothing. But for every legitimate athlete from football who is successful in wrestling - like collegiate and pro football hall of famers Bronko Nagurski of the Chicago Bears and Leo "The Lion" Nomellini of the 49ers and collegiate hall of famer Alex Karras of the Detroit Lions or Ernie "Big Cat" Ladd, the All-Pro defensive tackle who played for eight years with the Chargers, Oilers and Chiefs or Ed "Wahoo" McDaniel, who played linebacker for nine years with the Jets, Oilers, Broncos and Dolphins or Dick "The Bruiser" Afflis, who played for the Green Bay Packers in the 1950s —there are countless and forgotten others who are not.

Some athletes, like my old Rams teammate Merlin Olsen, sensibly turned away from promoter promises. Merlin and his brother Phil were promised $250,000 for a six month tour; Merlin was to wrestle as Kodiak Kid and brother Phil as The Blonde Grizzly; the Olsens declined the offer. Over the years, quite a few former NFLers have entered pro wrestling — Kim Bokamper, Greg Boyd, Darren Drosdov, Bobby Duncum, Sr., Bill Fralic (who used wrestling as leverage to a better deal with the Falcons),

University of Oregon All-American Russ Francis, Bill Goldberg of the University of Georgia, Kevin Greene, Walter Johnson, Jim Kiick, Butch Reed, Steve McMichael, Art Michalik, Reggie Miller , Brian Pillman, Otis Sistrunk, Dan Spivey of the University of Georgia, Lawrence Taylor, Leon White (who became Vader) —as well as some guys from the old USFL — Jim “Hacksaw” Duggan, Dewey Forte, Ed Gantner, Lex Luger (Lawrence Pfohl), John “Barbarian” Nord, Ron Simmons, Steve “Dr. Death” Williams and perhaps others. And some Canadian footballers have wrestled, such as Gene Kiniski, Angelo Mosca, Wilbur Snyder and George Wells. Three Chicago Bears —William “The Refrigerator” Perry, Jimbo Covert and Brad Muster —flirted with wrestling’s inducements. And Paul Orndorff and Jim Niedhart came from football backgrounds. And I was another NFLer the wrestling business thought it could make money with in the late 1960s and 1970s.

One night in the early spring of 1968 I found myself talking with my brother-in-law Mel and one of his friends at an Atlanta tavern. As I sat there looking into my bottle and wondering why selling insurance during the pro football off-season had become so boring, my two companions were discussing the Masked Superstar who had become very unpopular with the local wrestling crowd. This was nothing trivial because Georgians take their wrestling seriously, and Mel and his friend were members of that cult. As Mel and his friend talked about wrestling, my mind wandered back several years to Pittsburgh, where I had watched Bruno Sammartino on TV and worked out with him at the Jewish Y. I had known Bruno, I told them. And they asked me for some Bruno stories. As the beer and the talk and the evening continued on, I was becoming convinced by my companions to begin training for a career in pro wrestling. I was their nominee to run The Masked Superstar out of Georgia. I laughed at their less than sober encouragement to enter wrestling. Then the friend told me he would personally arrange my introduction to Ray Gunkel, the Atlanta wrestling promoter.

So, the football-wrestling connection was on my mind the day I walked into Gunkel's Atlanta wrestling office on Chester Avenue in March 1968. The office was located inside an old, foul smelling arena that seated probably 2,800 people. The building was no longer regularly used for wrestling shows; now, it housed the promotion's offices in the back that overlooked a wrestling ring that was used for rehearsals. There was a small, water-stained card in the window that said ABC Booking Inc., the only public hint that the office also booked wrestling shows throughout the region. The Atlanta wrestling promoter, as presented to the public, was Paul Jones, former wrestler and then an aging wrestling impresario who began the promotion in 1944. Unknown to the public, the office was actually managed and run by one of Jones' secret partners, wrestler Ray Gunkel. Gunkel had been a collegiate wrestling champion in the late 1940s, an AAU heavyweight at Purdue, and he still wrestled on the cards he promoted. Now, however, he was in his forties, looking a little overweight and soft and, I thought, too old for wrestling.

Gunkel knew I was playing football with the Atlanta Falcons, and remembered me from earlier days. "You were Vince Dooley's first All-American, weren't you?" I was pleased he remembered my name, and we talked football for awhile. It was a conversation that returning athletes savor. Not just for the ego-stroking, but because of the opportunities that athletic notoriety often brings. After returning from the San Francisco 49ers to play for the Falcons, I realized that townspeople remember ex-collegiate jocks for the oddest things. I learned that my career at Georgia had been memorialized in the phrase- *"Vince's first All-American"* I learned later that Ray Gunkel was one of those old-fashioned wrestling promoters - like Verne Gagne, Bob Geigel, Eddie Graham, Stu Hart, LeRoy McGuirk and Bill Watts - who liked to recruit legitimate athletes into pro wrestling. So, Gunkel and I talked football for awhile.

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I had come to the University of Georgia after being recruited by Wally Butts. I wasn't one of the big names coming out of high school athletics nationally because Edgewood High was one of the smallest schools in

Pennsylvania. But I was the biggest kid in the school and I was a good athlete. Edgewood High had maybe 300 students in a small, middleclass community with nice neighborhoods, but if you stood out, a big college might take a chance on you. I'd been an all- around jock in highschool - I was good at tennis, swimming, baseball, basketball and I was one of those guys who could walk around on my hands *all day long,* some said. My high school athletic exploits attracted attention and some people told my parents I could be an Olympic class swimmer, a tennis star, a great baseball player - just whatever I wanted to do. In fact, I got a couple of offers to play college basketball.

But I also had another characteristic that not many people knew about. At a very young age, I learned I would have to overcome a serious medical obstacle to continue in sports. My obstacle was a peculiar and chronic back problem that the doctors I was taken to didn't diagnose or know how to treat. As a result, my involvement in sports required that I adjust to constant discomfort, and I often slept on the floor when it bothered me. My determination to continue doing sports was sealed in 1951 when I saw a movie that changed my life - *Jim Thorpe, All-American* starring Burt Lancaster. As a nine-year old beanpole with an aching back, I found that famous native American's life so inspiring, I wanted to be an All-American running back just like him. And to do that, I knew I had to overcome my back problem so I started working out with weights in junior high school. I was determined and was willing to do everything I could do to overcome my obstacle. Even after the doctors told my parents, "Hey this kid shouldn't be doing contact sports" and had me wear a back brace for one entire summer; their advice and back brace therapy only made me more determined to beat my problem. By the time I was in highschool, I was playing both football and basketball, although I started to focus on football. My football interest developed about the time Jim Brown became pro football's most famous running back. When I watched Jim Brown play on TV and read about him in the newspapers, I got it in my head that I could be a great running back like Brown. So, between working out and a bodybuilder diet, I built myself up to Jim Brown's weight of 230, and tried to model myself after him - running and breaking tackles and scoring touchdowns. Although he was faster, I did a pretty good highschool imitation of him that got attention in the Pittsburgh area.

When my highschool football play produced headlines, my parents got a lot of unsolicited advice about which colleges I should apply to. In my family, everybody in several generations went to college, and there was never any question about my brothers and sister and me going to college, only which one; in my case, there was a good chance for an athletic scholarship. My grandfather on my mother's side, "Pop" Milligan, had tried out for football at Princeton in the early 1900s but didn't make the team; now, it was time to correct that mistake, and I was apparently the guy to do it.

This is a probably good place to say something about my family's expectations and the history of those expectations. When I was 18, I didn't understand these things, but now I see more clearly how my family's background shaped not only my personality but certain choices I've made over the years. I grew up in a household where everybody read newspapers and books, developed an interest in politics and social issues, and had a sense of family history. On my mother's side, there was a long lineage of persons who had been involved in American history, politics and education. My maternal grandmother was an eleventh generation descendant of John Alden and Pricilla Mullins who traveled to America on the Mayflower. My mother's great, great, great uncle was Rev. Timothy Alden, a New England clergyman who founded Allegheny College in 1815; a great, great uncle on my mother's side was Howard Eaton, an early rancher in the West and a pal of Teddy

Roosevelt. My great Aunt Guffie Miller was national Democratic chairwoman when FDR was President, and her family donated money and land to Slippery Rock College, which is why several buildings there are named for her; her brother Joe was a two-term US Senator from Pennsylvania.

On my father's side, my grandfather E. W. Wilson was a Wall Street bond broker while my father Edward attended The Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut. My father's side of the family had several military leaders, including Dad who was a Navy captain in World War II and a highly decorated officer (two Legion of Merit medals for bravery, a bronze star, a Purple Heart with Oak Leaf for being wounded five times, the American Theater Meal, the Pacific Theater Medal with two bronze stars for participation in two major campaigns, a European Theater medal with a

gold star for five major campaigns, a World War I Victory Medal and World War II Victory Medal and the Croix de Guerre with Palm for liberation of France) for his service in north Africa, Sicily, Italy, the Pacific and Normandy. When I was a boy on Dad's lap, he placed my small hand on the pieces of shrapnel and slugs still lodged in his head, located too close to his brain to remove. He was a genuine freedom fighter all over the globe in the world's bloodiest war, and he was my personal hero.

My mother, Alice Milligan Wilson, who went to Carnegie Tech, now Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, married Edward Wilson who graduated from Williams College. They taught their four children - Edward, III (Toby), Edie, Bob and me - to become interested in serious matters in the larger world. At our house, dinnertime was always the occasion for interesting and lively talk. As I look back on it now, I understand how and why I became so passionate about principles and politics. At our supper table, we didn't discuss my mother's bridge games or my sister's swimming achievements or the football and basketball games my bothers and I played. We talked politics, sometimes national events, sometimes local. Every night. And the four kids were expected to have something to say, since my parents attached importance to each individual's right to speak and right to be heard. I was taught early that there are usually at least two sides to each story, and anybody who had something to say ought to stand up and say it.

But the important thing was to have something to say. In my parents' home, children were seen *and* heard. Along with this political education, my sister and brothers and I also were taught a work ethic. We kids had chores around the house, and all of us were expected to take school seriously.

Despite the value attached to schooling, everybody in the Wilson family was athletic - except Mom, whose recreation was bridge. Dad liked golf and tennis and my sister Edie was a swimmer and Toby played tennis and basketball through highschool and at Allegheny College; Bobby also played tennis and basketball in highschool and college. But it was simply expected that all the Wilson children would become educated and get on with their respectable middle class lives, a tradition carried on by my own six children who've earned both undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. But I'm very proud of my lineage, and I'm not bashful in talking about it. Which is why Ray Didinger of the *Philadelphia Daily News* wrote in 1985 *"There isn't much that is red, white or blue that Big Jim and his family*

haven't stood for these past200years" In other words, my long family history of political and social activism helps explain my commitment to certain principles and the tenacity of my efforts to reform pro wrestling.

Although few bigtime college football powers recruited me out of highschool, when the University of Georgia flew Dad and me to Athens for a recruiting visit, I fell in love with the place. It was warm and beautiful. I had been to Pitt, where the coach had a losing record and facilities that were run down and old. It was a concrete jungle where, as a kid, I had run up the 50 floors of stairs at the Cathedral of Learning. But Georgia was the Old South, and I thought the campus looked like what a college campus was supposed to look like. When I was introduced to the Georgia football players, they said, *"God, you're a fullback,* Now, Georgia was a bigtime college football school, and I was as large as some of the linemen. But the era of the big back had not yet hit the South. Schools in the North and the Big Ten always had bruisers in the backfield, and I didn't see anything so startling because I had modeled myself after Jimmy Brown.

Dad and I were introduced to Coach Wally Butts, Charley Trippi (Pittston, PA), a 1946 All-American who later played with the Chicago Cardinals, and Frankie Sinkwich (Mckees Rocks, PA), two great legacies to live up to from Pennsylvania, as well as some other great football names from the University of Georgia - the 1960 All-American Fran Tarkenton was the Georgia quarterback, and Pat Dye, the All-American lineman and later, Auburn's ultra-successful football coach. They took a liking to me especially after we shared a few beers. We watched the annual Georgia-Georgia Tech game at Grant Field. It was an exciting game and Georgia finally won it with Maxie Baughn, Georgia Tech's All-American linebacker and center and my future Rams teammate, who played in that game. He had a red beard and half his teeth were knocked out. But when I looked around, I noticed many other Georgia players wore the same crazed look: unshaven, three-day stubbles around their mouths that contained a lot of missing teeth. I thought, *What the hell am I getting into ? These guys are monsters!* While I hung out with the Georgia players, one of the assistant coaches showed Dad around the campus and city. He was taken to Wally's house where they drank and told war stories. Dad didn't like to talk about himself but after a few drinks, he would tell stories about his World War II experiences in Africa, Italy, Normandy and in the Pacific. He was a real blood and guts

guy and the University of Georgia represented blood and guts football, so he loved Georgia, too.

I was impressed with Coach Wally Butts, a little fireplug of a guy who had the reputation of knowing how to prepare college players for the pro ranks. The Philadelphia Eagles had won their world championship with quarterback Norm van Brocklin and three Georgia guys who played for Wally Butts - Riley Gunnels, Marion Campbell and Tharen Sapp - and Georgia played that up. They knew I wanted a collegiate football experience that would help me on the road to my ultimate ambition to play professionally. I had set my sights on pro football years earlier, and I thought it would pave the way for a future in business and the rest of my life would be laid out in front of me. So I signed a letter of intent at spring practice. Although I had been recruited enthusiastically, there were 15 other highschool All-Americans who had been recruited more seriously, I learned later. I had heard tales about collegiate recruiting, of course, but in those days the social consciousness was not yet sensitive to this form of abuse. I felt slighted;

I thought I was as good as they were, although I came from a smaller school with only 32 kids on my football team.

I've always been like that - independent and self-confident. If I don't know something, I can damned sure find out and do what it takes to get a job done if given the opportunity. Before classes began, I spent the summer running and working out, getting lean and mean for that running back position. I had it burned in my brain that I was going to be a running back at Georgia. I was in for a big shock, and it came on the first day of freshman practice. The freshman coach, Johnny Griffith, switched me to center, a position I had never played and knew nothing about. Ordinarily, centers aren't regarded as great hitters, but I soon developed that reputation. On the second day of practice, they put the freshmen against the varsity in bag drills. I was on defense, holding the bags for the varsity. Coach Sam Mrvos walked over and whispered, "Wilson, go over there and hit Godfrey!" Then another coach told me, "Give him a pop when he comes through the line! Knock Godfrey on his ass!" I knew the coaching staff was goading me, but I also wanted to impress them with what I could do. Now, Bill Godfrey was the varsity fullback and one of the team captains. He was the proverbial brick shithouse - short, stubby and muscular. He had a black beard and not a

tooth in his head. He looked like one tough and mean SOB, and he was. I did what the coaches told me to do. I popped him real good and we got into a fight. While the coaches broke up the fight, they were yelling, "Way to go Wilson! Way to go!" But Coach Butts was angry, and he came running toward me. "*God damn it,"* he screamed, *"Who's that boy over there?"* He was mad because it was supposed to be a half-speed drill. One of the other coaches told him, "Well this is his first day of practice and he doesn't know any better." *"Well, we need more people like him!"* Wally fumed. After that, Wally took a liking to me, as did the varsity players.

At the University of Georgia, the freshman Bullpups played only three games a year. The rest of the time we were bumping heads with the varsity. At center I was adequate, but my heart wasn't in it. At linebacker, however, I could make things happen, and I had a big game against the Georgia Tech freshmen. This was the freshman game that got national attention since it was staged as a charity event for the Scottish Rite Hospital, and it attracted 40 to 50,000 people. For some reason, I went wild in that game and knocked a couple of Tech players out. Although we tied the score, we came from behind to do it. After the game, the dressing room was filled with screaming, celebrating Bulldog boosters; while they were going nuts, several wanted to shake my hand - with twenty dollar bills.

But an underlying unhappiness was eating at me. When they wouldn't let me play running back, it was a tremendous disappointment. They knew I was a hitter and a player, but I just wasn't where I wanted to be. They had a couple of highschool All-Americans in front of me. I didn't argue. I was a young, dumb kid in a new environment 750 miles from home. So I went along with the program, although I boiled on the inside.

After the last game of the season, I attended a team event regarded as a Georgia football institution - the players called it The Seagraves Party. I had participated in my share of fraternity social events that fall, but I was unprepared for how the Georgia football team would behave after sucking down 50 cases of beer donated by Frankie Sinkwich, Georgia's first Heisman Trophy winner and then a local beer distributor. These drunken rituals included upperclass players ordering freshmen to bite off live fish and frog heads. Everyone was drunk and sick and puking and peeing on the lawn. And then, there were challenges to fight; the ground rules were everyone could challenge anyone and duke it out, but when the fighting

started, the freshmen players were scared. Except me, but no one challenged me to fight; that's when I realized I had developed a tough guy rep.

Nor was I ordered to eat fishheads and frogs, which were not this party's main course. For that, the players arranged for a barbecued pig. Earlier in the week, some players stole a pig from the University's agricultural farm and took this 300 pound pig over to Payne Hall where they dragged it into the showers. While the pig was squealing like crazy, they soaked it down and cleaned it and every once in a while, the pig broke loose, running up and down the halls, snorting and squealing. On the morning of the Seagraves Party, the players closed off the entrances to Payne Hall and gave the pig something to eat to get him happy just before they took it back into the shower and butchered it with a huge knife. They cut the head off and flushed the blood down the shower drain. While some of the other players started the barbecue, other guys played games with the pig's head. That night, Doc Blanchard tied the hog's head on his old car as a hood ornament, filled up the car with teammates and beer, and drove up and down sorority row, mooning everyone and terrorizing the coeds.

Payne Hall was an old four-story building, constructed in the 1930s by the WPA. It housed all the University of Georgia jocks, but most of the roommates were football players, and the basketball and baseball and track guys were scared by the football players. It was Sam Richwine, the football team's trainer, whose hopeless duty was keeping young and wild football players out of serious trouble during these peculiar rites of passage. Sam's daily (and nightly) lot was to babysit a herd of boys trying to become men by rumbling with each other for fun, flashing coeds, shooting guns off inside and out of the dorm, sneaking girls in for parties, using rope ladders to escape for more fun after bed check, dropping cherry bombs down toilets, putting snakes in each other's beds and, the jocks' real specialty, performing nightly food fights inside Payne Hall's cafeteria. It was the original Animal House, live and in color 24/7.

In between episodes of foolishness, I took the usual freshmen business courses and did well because I was well prepared by Edgewood High. During that year, I also got involved with intramural wrestling for my fraternity, Alpha Tau Omega. Although I'd never wrestled varsity in highschool because of football, I had wrestled and boxed in summer camps and for my church team in Edgewood. But beyond the footballers' antics in Payne Hall and sometimes serious study and fraternity wrestling, certain larger matters loomed over the University of Georgia campus in Athens. During those early 1960s, Georgia was the cradle of the nation's civil rights movement, and its development and growth during those years became part of my education. Up the road from campus, Martin Luther King's activity was based at Ebeneezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. As a Yankee outsider, it was a real learning experience to see two southern cultures, one white and one black. Even on a college campus.

Coming from a middle class neighborhood outside Pittsburgh, the south's apartheid was new to me. At that time, there were no black athletes on the football team - in fact, no black students in the entire university. I'll never forget the night in 1961 that Georgia state troopers marched into Athens to maintain peace while Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes, two black students, struggled to gain admission to the University of Georgia. It was during that firestorm that a few thousand Georgia students marched and chanted, *Two, Four, Six, Eight - We Don't Want To Integrate!* Later, Hunter-Gault became a famous TV news reporter for Public Broadcast System and CNN, and Dr. Holmes a respected doctor; today, both are distinguished alumni with streets and buildings named after them, and I wonder if today's black students at the University of Georgia know about their struggle to open the door for them.

One important reason I didn't understand racial intolerance was my family's teachings and practices about prejudice of any kind. When I was growing up in white, middle class Edgewood, Pennsylvania in the 1940s and 1950s, there were three common targets of white, middle class hostility - blacks, Jews and gays - and I encountered all of them as a boy. With regard to racism, not many other white kids had a Bertha Lee in their life. Bertha and her sister had worked in my family for several generations, helping with the children and doing domestic labor. Bertha, a black woman, was regarded as a member of the family, one with whom we shared respect and love. She

was the reason I was comfortable with black people; it never occurred to me to be afraid or intimidated, and I learned this when I was very young. She gave me love that I could not turn away from, and helped raise my own children in later years with the same love and kindness given me. I also encountered anti-Semitism in my Pennsylvania grade school when I developed a friendship with a kid named Ron Silverstein; some of my other friends had told me to stay away from Ron "because he's a Jewboy," but Ron and I continued our friendship. Sometime later, the father of another highschool classmate was said to be gay and after the usual stigmatizing rumors circulated, my brother Toby and I reported it to Mom and Dad. After school, Toby and I were delivering potted plants for the man's flower shop and wondered if we should stop, but both Mom and Dad put it this way: what if your own son or daughter were gay? Would you cut them off, reject them and say you didn't love them any longer? In my family, we were taught to love humanity and not get sidetracked by irrelevancies. Years later, I sometimes wondered if I was attracted to people who were told they shouldn't do this and couldn't go there or couldn't do that - I'd already seen the consequences of this and understood how wrong it was.

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After my first year at the University of Georgia, Coach Wally Butts retired. The libel lawsuit that he and Bear Bryant brought against the *Saturday Evening Post* was consuming his time and money. Butt's replacement was Johnny Griffith, the freshman coach and the man who wanted me to play center. I didn't like that, of course, but in retrospect, he did me a huge favor. When I was inducted into the State of Georgia Sports Hall of Fame 41 years later in 2001, it was Coach Griffith and Coach Erk Russell who introduced me, and I finally thanked him for his confidence in me. And it wasn't easy for the Georgia coaches to convince me that I belonged on the line, not in the backfield - especially after team practices showed that nobody on the team could stop me from the five yard line into the goal line. In fact, during a week of practice during my second year when they were still letting me play fullback, I knocked out three guys in three days - knocked them out cold turkey by hitting them up under the chin;

each time I knocked a guy out, they stopped practice to cart the guy off. After I realized what I had done - gone one-on-one with three of the toughest guys on the squad and knocked them out - I knew I was suited for pro wrestling. I told this story years later when reporters would ask how my wrestling career began - *"/t began in the summer of 1961 in Athens, Georgia when / sent three mean SOBs to the showers"*

Despite my mayhem on the practice field, two Georgia coaches came to my room the night I knocked out the third guy in three days to announce I wasn't fullback material. Coach Charlie Trippi said, "Jim, we need your talent and ability on the line." After much more discussion between my family and the coaching staff, we finally agreed on the condition they let me redshirt for a year so I could build myself up, physically, to play against other big guys on the line. The coaches accepted my proposal to spend my sophomore year working out, and I bulked up from about 228 to 258. While doing that, I watched the Georgia Bulldogs from the sideline. Georgia lost. The team lost and lost, and I boiled on the inside and wasn't very good at hiding my resentment. One night before Christmas break, I spent a few hours drinking with other players and after we all got bombed, went back to the dorm where some of my other drunken brothers issued challenges to fight. And as might be expected, I joined in, challenging everyone, too. After nobody in Payne Hall wanted to fight me, I suddenly exploded with the resentment and disappointment that had been building up inside me for several weeks. When all this emotion came roaring out, I tore a couple of doors down, ripped two water coolers off the wall, shot-put spittoons, punched out lights and smashed windows. Eventually, I calmed down and went to bed, but when I looked around Payne Hall the next morning, I couldn't believe it: I had torn the place apart. And although the coaches had to pay for the damage, which was considerable, they loved what I had done. One said, "*Gawd damn, this guy is an animal!"*

But something had to be done about it, of course, and so Georgia kicked me out of school for a quarter, and sent me home with the understanding I'd be invited back. One of the coaches said, "If Jim Wilson will play football like that, we want him back!" That spring, I experimented briefly with anabolic steroids to get bigger. At the time, steroid use for nonmedical purposes was legal, or so I was told by a pre-med friend I worked out with who got the stuff for both of us. I was already 258, just

from my own weight gaining program of gym work, big meals, powdered protein and vitamins but a couple of weightlifters told me about the wonders of Dianabol tablets and offered to provide a month's supply. So, I took five milligrams every other day for four weeks that spring. And I ate steroids for all the reasons that, years later, became public knowledge - strength and size without regard for medical consequences. After experimenting with them, I noticed an unexplainable ache in my side, and I stopped. I feared cancer, which already had struck members of my family, and that was the end of my flirtation with steroids although I would see many other athletes use them later on, in both pro football and wrestling.

The next year at Georgia, I came around as a lineman. Initially, I was put on the B-team, the red-shirted hamburger squad (today, they're called *scout squad),* and my job was to practice against the varsity. Throughout that fall, I took on the varsity linemen, one by one, and nobody hit them harder. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported I had been "unusually rough" on varsity players in practice. I didn't know what the coaches were thinking until B-team coach Sam Mrvos told reporters, "I don't know of a tackle in the country who has more strength than Jim Wilson - or who's any better all around." But I still wasn't playing varsity, although that changed after the Auburn game late in the season. I was sent into the game in the second half when varsity tackle Ray Rissmiller started limping (he was one of the guys I racked up in practice), and I went crazy again, just beating the shit out of everybody. When I looked toward the sidelines, I saw a long lineup of the rest of the team jumping up and down and screaming. We won the game 3021, which was the biggest upset of the year (since Auburn was loaded with talent) and the major achievement of Coach Griffith's tenure at Georgia. And my physical play generated some ink. The *Constitutions* sports staff christened me *Jumbo Jimbo* in memorializing my varsity debut, and noted my jersey number hadn't been printed in the program. The trainer Sam Richwine said, "I've been on the Georgia bench for 16 years, but I have never seen the entire team stand up on the sidelines to watch one player perform as the boys did when Coach Griffith sent Wilson into the game." And varsity line coach Wyatt Posey told reporters, "Big Jim plays cleanly - it's just that he is so tremendously strong." Although I still didn't earn a letter that year, I must have finally proven myself to the coaches because I played again in the season's finale against Georgia Tech, after

which there were more of those funny handshakes with members of the Bulldog Club in the locker room.

But something else happened that year which was more important:

I fell in love. I'd seen her picture in the yearbook the year before and thought, boy, this is a beautiful woman. I hadn't been very interested in girls until college. In highschool, I attended dances but watched from the sidelines because I was shy around women. But now, I had met Nita Jones between classes and I was smitten by her flashing dark eyes, her light-up-the-room smile and irreverent sense of humor which chipped away at my seriousness. We started dating, driving around Athens in my old Ford but I missed her so much during Christmas break that I returned early to spend a week with her in East Point, Georgia at her family's home. It was a romantic Christmas because it snowed and we rode a bus back to Athens. A few weeks later, we decided to marry. When our plans got around, the coaches gave me a hard time - "It'll ruin your life, you'll get lazy, your wife will worry about your getting hurt," I was told. We were married secretly the following spring just before football practice. We found a judge who asked, "Is this a one-ring or two-ring ceremony?" I replied, "This is a no-ring ceremony!" Besides our parents and the judge, no one else knew. She lived in her dorm and I lived in mine, and we spent weekends together.

By the next year, I was a senior academically but a junior in terms of football eligibility. After other Southeastern Conference (SEC) coaches started talking about me, Georgia decided to play me both ways, offensive and defensive tackle. When it rains, it pours. And I gave football every ounce of effort I had on every play, which was noted by pro scouts, I learned later. But the University of Georgia was not winning football games very often. After only nine wins in three years, Coach Griffith was fired. In fairness, Coach Griffith had a tough act to follow: Wally Butts was a hard driving and hard living guy who worked the players relentlessly. And players cursed him at night, but they'd go out the next day and do the same thing. They produced and Butts won. And it worked for many years. Like Bear Bryant, people either loved or hated Coach Butts, and like Coach Bryant, his success was unarguable. After Wally Butts and Bear Bryant won the *Post* lawsuit, Wally started his own insurance business that sold credit life insurance to Georgia businesses where half the guys who ran the companies used to play for him. He was very successful, and a hell of a

guy. He was the main reason I went to Georgia, and I attended his funeral when he died in 1973. He will always be remembered and revered by Georgians, including me.

Coach Griffith's replacement was the freshman coach at Auburn, Vince Dooley. I didn't know who Vince Dooley was, and nobody else in Athens did either. "*Vince who?* they asked when he was hired. I happened to be sitting on the steps of the athletic office the day Dooley arrived, and I witnessed one of those rare primal scenes: as Dooley's furniture was being carried in, Griffith's furniture was getting moved out. Griffith shook my hand and said, "Jim, you're one of the great players in the country . . ." Then Coach Dooley approached me. "Jim I'm counting on you to be a leader next year. I hope you'll stay and play your last year and help lead the team," he said. Dooley knew who I was because I'd been drafted earlier in the week by the San Francisco 49ers. I was the highest draft on the Georgia team and one of the highest future eligible drafts in the country, although I had yet to be awarded a letter by the University of Georgia's losing football team. Coach Dooley's spring practice was as different from Griffith's as night from day. For one thing, Dooley *taught* the game of football. Under Griffith, if you could hit someone, that was enough. Dooley brought a more refined approach to college football and wasted no time in bringing together the elements of success. When spring practice ended, Dooley held a press conference on the floor of Sanford Stadium. An hour earlier, I had gone to the locker room with a broken thumb but I learned of Dooley's views about my performance in the morning newspaper where he called me "as good as or better than anybody in this part of the country" and reported my selection by the coaches as winner of the outstanding spring player award.

That summer, Nita and I went to Redwood City, where the 49ers set me up with a summer job doing road maintenance. I suspect it was intended to be one of those *jobs-you-don't-have-to-show-up-for,* but I wanted to be legit and I worked. At night and on weekends, Nita and I enjoyed Carmel, Monterey and the rest of northern California's paradise. It was our delayed honeymoon, and a romantic time. Lou Spadia (who ran the 49ers for owners Josephine and Jane Morabito, widows of the team's founder Anthony Morabito) and his wife Maggie took a special interest in Nita and me, often having us to their home for dinner on weekends and going to restaurants with us during the week. Lou took a paternalistic interest in my

football career and he insisted I return to Athens to finish my senior year and get the degree. Maybe the Spadias liked us because we were young and naive. One morning in church, Nita fainted. She was terribly sick, and I carried her out of church and took her home. I called Lou. I said, “Gosh, something’s wrong with Nita! She’s fainted and feeling all these awful things and feels terrible in the morning.” Spadia interrupted me, “Congratulations!” He was right - Nita was pregnant. After four months of marriage, the first of six was on the way.

We returned to Athens for our final year at Georgia. Poor Nita, pregnant and sick, finished her senior year by struggling through her preganancy with Josh, our first child and gaining sixty pounds to deliver a baby of ten pounds - a remarkable achievement by a woman who was about five feet tall. I had my own struggle with a dilemma that took on larger proportions. Although I had verbally committed myself to the 49ers, the Boston Patriots of the rival American Football League (AFL) pursued me with vengeance. Unlike the 49ers who encouraged me to finish college and then talk about a contract, the Patriots pressured me. They wanted me to sign right away, and offered some serious money to put my name on an undated contract. I made the mistake of talking about Nita’s pregnancy, which they then used in a high pressure sales pitch. “*You have a serious situation! You’ve got a baby coming and you might break your leg! You might not ever play! You’d better sign now!”*I was told. Well, I hadn’t thought about that, and the prospect of an immanent career-ending injury bothered me. How *would* I support Nita and the baby? So, I flew to Newark airport and met with Mike Holovak, the Patriots’ coach. When they put the undated contract in front of me, I somehow convinced myself it wasn’t binding. And I made the mistake of signing the thing and accepting their money without consulting an attorney or anybody else. After I returned to Athens, I cashed the bonus check; my teammates wanted to know where I got the new blue T-Bird. I didn’t say anything about the car or the Patriots deal to anybody but with Nita pregnant, I decided to tell Coach Dooley that we’d gotten married that summer. He was not happy, again reciting the warning that he’d seen married players turn into putty because their wives worried about them getting hurt.

The spectacular success of the Georgia football team in 1964 consumed most of my attention but later that fall, I realized my undated

contract with the Patriots was wrong and I returned the bonus money, telling the Patriots to forget about it. Now, my focus was on my final season of collegiate football. The team had a great year, Coach Dooley had a great year and I had a great year. Although Coach Dooley later canceled the Seagraves Party, Georgia football was back after a long absence since 1959 when Tarkenton and Dye played. By now, collegiate football had gone to two platoons, although I played tackle both ways. When the other team came inside the 30 yard line, I played defense. As the only player to go both ways at Georgia after the two-platoon system was put in, I averaged about 50 minutes a game that season and got to play defense for the legendary Erk Russell, our defensive coordinator. I was so busy with football and studying, I didn't take time to read the newspaper clippings that Nita was pasting into a scrapbook. Later, I learned my blocking was "root-hog-or-die" in the South Carolina game, and after the Kentucky game, Dooley told reporters I was the only two-way Bulldog because I was "strong enough to play that much." Defensive coach Erk Russell told reporters, "Wilson looks like King Kong playing with people out there." When Dooley was selected SEC coach of the year, he said, "Our biggest [asset] was Jim Wilson - an All-American tackle on both defense and offense. No opponent beat Wilson during the season, and no one will beat him. He is the strongest and most powerful college player I've ever seen."

A few weeks later, ballots were cast by the nation's sportswriters and coaches for the 1964 collegiate football standouts, and the results pleased everybody in Athens, Georgia and in Edgewood, Pennsylvania. I became a consensus selection to the 1964 SEC All-Conference team in the voting of Associated Press and United Press International and a consensus selection to the 1964 All-American collegiate football teams - the Associated Press All-American Team, the Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA) All-American Team and the Football Writers Association *Look* All-American Team, the Helms Foundation All-America Team and *Sports Extra's* All-American team. Later on, I was elected to the Helms Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame and the University of Georgia All-Time Team and the University of Georgia All-Decade Team for the 1960s.

I hoped the ink would help me find a place in the National Football League. But finding my place in the NFL caused a national controversy in both pro football and the NCAA. In December 1964, Georgia played (and

beat) Texas Tech in the Sun Bowl, 7 to 0. Immediately after that game, I was voted the game's "outstanding lineman" and signed a five- figure, three-year-no-cut contract with the San Francisco 49ers. Within hours, the AFL's Patriots protested my 49er contract, saying I had already signed an undated contract to play for them; the Patriots admitted they had stashed the undated contract out of sight so I would play out my collegiate career. Now, there was a stink that made national news, and not just on the sports pages. *Newsweek* memorialized the affair with a photograph of me lighting up a big cigar after the game, and observed, "Everybody was vulnerable - and will be, so long as the battle of the bankbooks goes on." I felt compromised. Agents and lawyers were not used then as now, and I was too young and unsophisticated to understand what I was doing. When Coach Dooley was asked to respond to the controversy, he offered to forfeit games I'd played in. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there'd been other SEC players who'd done the same thing, and the other schools said to forget about it.

Coach Dooley placed blame on the Patriots' absent ethics and criticized vague NCAA rules governing red-shirted athletes. Afterward, Coach Dooley established a program to provide legal advice to University of Georgia athletes confronting contracts in professional sport. In retrospect, I guess some good came out of the whole thing. Years afterward, when Coach Dooley retired from coaching after 25 years, he talked at length with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about his 25 seasons at Georgia, 1964 through 1988. I was gratified to read what Coach Dooley said about that 1964 team: "At first we were a bunch of individuals, and to watch them grow into a team, that was very rewarding. I remember a big guy named Jim Wilson from up in Pennsylvania who had nothing in common with Lynn Hughes, a little guy from Atlanta. After a game that we lost, Lynn Hughes was really down, saying, 'I lost the game.' Big Jim Wilson grabbed him by the arm and said, 'You didn't lose the game, we lost the game.' Years later, when I was inducted into the Hall of Fame, Coach Dooley repeated the compliment. "Jim Wilson brought that first team together," he said.

Thirty-seven years after I left the University of Georgia campus, I was inducted into the Georgia State Sports Hall of Fame. It took a long time to get that honor, and it probably wouldn't have happened if my own children hadn't written letters to Georgia's movers and shakers, suggesting they

reconsider what the kids thought was a significant oversight. The induction ceremony's cocktail party was awkward when my old Georgia coaches - Vince Dooley, Erk Russell, Johnny Griffith and Doc Ayers - each grabbed my arm or patted me on the back with a timid concession: "Jim," they said, "You should have been put in the hall of fame 25 years ago." Each of my old coaches said that but they didn't tell me why I'd been passed over for so long. They didn't have to because I thought I knew why - I'd become too controversial by asking to many questions to Georgia politicians about regulating and unionizing pro wrestling. It was one of those little political secrets that everybody knew but couldn't talk about in my presence, as I discuss later in this book.

Yes, I was Vince Dooley's first consensus All-American, but the more meaningful honor for me was helping restore winning football at the University of Georgia. But my most significant accomplishment was overcoming my birth defect, my abnormal spine - *Spondylolisthesis.* I was determined to prove the doctors wrong, the doctors who had said I would never be involved in sports, and I had to work harder than others. Just being able to play football was a great achievement for me, but I wanted it so badly that nothing could stop me. It was a difficult struggle, but it prepared me to deal with some other tough situations later on down the road.

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That summer brought a short taste of the seriousness with which professional football takes itself when I played in the College All-Star Game at Chicago's Soldier Field. Otto Graham coached the collegians, and ordered us to appear in Evanston for workouts and practice three weeks prior to the game with the Cleveland Browns. The collegians lost, of course, but I didn't care because I played against my high school idol, the great Jim Brown. The All-Star game also provided me with the opportunity to meet some other young football players whose names I had heard - in addition to Fred Biletnikoff, Dick Butkus and Gale Sayers, Otto Graham also selected Roger Stauback, Bob Hayes, Ralph Neeley, Bill Curry, Steve DeLong and Ken Willard among others. The collegians spent much of those three weeks inside Chicago's Playboy Club, then a Midwestern cultural landmark. I am

sure the Orrington Hotel in Evanston was thrilled when the Browns beat us and we checked out.

The transition from bigtime college football to the genuinely professional variety, an implied distinction that many critics understandably cannot make, was a challenge that I accepted more easily after I understood that professionals are expected to act like they're going to war, not to a game. I had enjoyed the physical challenge of SEC football, but I had never been told to play hurt. Nor expected to use drugs as a crutch for injuries. In pro football at that time, the wounded were assisted by several pharmaceutical companies and some cognitive readjustment - mental attitude, they called it. No pain, no gain. So, I acquired some additional will-power and determination, along with access to the professionals' unholy cornucopia of drugs. *The Pregame Meal,* we called it. "Just take what you need," the players were told, and everybody helped themselves to amphetamines and pain pills.

In my case, adjustment to pro football also involved learning how to deal with other players of my size, speed and strength. Until now, I had always been one of the largest men on any team I played, and I had never needed to develop the sophisticated footwork and blocking angles that are necessary for survival in the NFL. The 49ers were then coached by Jack Christiansen, formerly a defensive back for the Detroit Lions in the days of Nightrain Lane and Jim David. Christiansen's 49ers were a .500 team in 1965 and 1966, although we had some phenomenal players in John David Crow, the running back and Heisman

Trophy winner coached by Bear Bryant at Texas A & M, John Brodie, an All-Pro quarterback, and two of the toughest guys I ever met in football - Bruce Bosley, the 49er center for 14 years, and Charlie Krueger, another All-Pro at defensive tackle. But my closest friends were some other 1964 rookies - Jim Norton, defensive end from the University of Washington, Joe Cerne, center from Northwestern and Ken Willard, a very tough fullback from North Carolina who I played against in college. We all learned and relearned football together. Another adjustment involved the transition from playing tackle to guard, and Tiger Bill Johnson, the 49er line coach, spent countless afternoons working with me after the rest of the team went to the showers. He was trying to get me into the hunt quickly with the help of six foot eight, 285 pound Bob Brown, an unbelievable physical specimen and

future All-Pro defensive tackle. Bob was literally big enough to block out the sun and his instruction in blocking passes involved clubbing me. I hated the prospect of 49er practices as he beat me into overcoming a glaring weakness and at the end of the season, I was named to UPI's All-NFL Rookie team for 1965.

For a transplanted Pittsburgh kid, northern California seemed idyllic. But it was going to be difficult to realize my objective of making All-Pro sitting on the 49er bench. I had been moved from offensive tackle to offensive guard and although I was learning my trade, I would only play when either John Thomas or Howard Mudd were injured and both Thomas and Mudd were All-Pro and rarely injured. The 49ers were building for the future and they were wisely stocking young, good players, but I wanted to play football and after two years, I asked to be traded to the Atlanta Falcons. The 49ers accommodated me, making a deal with Atlanta that involved obtaining a Falcon first round draft choice in exchange for Jim Norton, Bernie Casey, a flanker, and me. That trade was controversial from the time it was announced. First, Casey, who was black, refused to go to Atlanta, the first pro football franchise in the deep south and one that was only a year old but located squarely inside a few hundred years of subcultural apartheid. At that time, the Falcons had *only* three black players - Junior Coffee, Ken Reaves and Ron Smith - and Casey understandably was reluctant to go south. I was sympathetic with Casey's position because in all the years I played in the SEC, I did not see one black football player. In fact, after highschool football, the next black player I met was a 49er. So, Casey arranged to be sent to the Rams, where he and I were later reunited, and I went to Atlanta with Norton.

I was thrilled to be back in Georgia, an area and a people that I learned to love during my years in Athens. Then some old problems began at training camp at Johnson City, Tennessee. I had intended to work hard enough to become All-Pro for the Falcons, and I reported to training camp weighing 252 pounds, six pounds below my 49er training camp bulk. I thought that was a good sign until I read in the newspaper that Brad Ecklund, the Falcon offensive line coach thought that I "wasn't in the shape that I should've been in." Lots of other players, too. Somehow, the coaches figured the Falcon football mess would straighten itself out if enough players suffered dehydration and exhaustion in the hot and humid summer

of Johnson City. We were all losing 10 to 15 pounds a day from sweating. The entire team turned white from the salt that dried on our uniforms.

I had other problems as well. Just before training camp began, I attended the funeral of Navy Captain Edward W. Wilson, the most important person I ever knew. My father was a genuine hero to me, not just because he had been a decorated officer during World War II; unlike other military kids, I was close to Dad, and his interest in the development of my athletic career was sincere, not the more common syndrome where the fathers of athletes repeat their spent youths through the kid's accomplishments. Dad's death came unexpectedly and it consumed me. At 26, I was not yet familiar with mortality and its aftermath. Grief burned inside me, and the stress aggravated some physical ailments - first, a shoulder injury, then my chronic back problem and then a hip pointer. I ate a lot of potassium, a natural muscle relaxer I had taken almost all my life, and I was administered double injections of painkillers every day while I also visited the chiropractors of Johnson City. I started several pre-season games, but I missed half the regular season because of the back problem. When I didn't dress for the games, Nita didn't bother going to them. It was then that I learned from the Falcon's team physician, Dr. James Funk, that I suffered from *Spondylolisthesis.* That explained an awful lot of my childhood and adolescence during which I slept on the floor, ate muscle relaxers and wore braces. My undiagnosed and nameless curse was a birth defect. I managed to return for the Falcon's final game of the season in the Los Angeles Coliseum against the Rams, and I played well against All-Pro Merlin Olsen. I didn't know it then but I learned later how important that game would be for my future: George Allen was watching.

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Suddenly, Ray Gunkel changed the subject, "Well, enough about football, Jim. Are you interested in the wrestling business?"

Frankly, I didn't know enough about it to give him an honest answer. But, for some reason, wrestling always had some intuitive appeal. Just the names of wrestling's holds were slightly inspiring - the *crucifix armbar,* the *scorpion deathlock,* the *tombstone piledriver,* the *chicken wing submission,*

the *fisherman suplex,* the *octopus deathlock,* etcetera. And I was curious about how the obvious show was staged. I knew it wasn't legitimate - it didn't take an athlete to see that, but that's all I knew. Ray asked if I had done any wrestling in college or highschool, and I told him I'd I wrestled for my college fraternity in intramural and had wrestled some in highschool and at summer camps and for church teams years earlier. But I knew nothing about the pro variety. So, pulling together all the indignation appropriate for a real athlete talking to a phoney wrestler, I said, *"Well, Ray what is this business? What's going on?"* Ray wasn't very informative. He told me how well someone with my football background would *get over.* And he talked about the circuits and the tours and the money and the possibilities of advancement. Ray figured I was no dummy, and he didn't spell it out; nor did he try to *kayfabe* me, as they say. He knew who I was, and that's all *he* needed to know. But that wasn't all / needed to know. And then I made a terrible gaffe when I just blurted out what was on my mind. *"Well, how do you know who's supposed to win?"* I asked innocently. Ray didn't respond for a few seconds, looking puzzled and awkward. Finally, he said, "Can you come back down here tomorrow? We'll put you in the ring with one of *the boys* and see how it goes." I said that would be fine, and walked outside into some fresh air.

I returned the next day, and Ray introduced me to a guy named Johnny Walker, one of his wrestlers. I said, "Hi, how y'all doin'" to a balding and physically unimpressive five foot eleven, 220 pound man in his early 40s. But I was in for some surprises when Ray invited him to show me some wrestling moves in the ring they had in the back. Although Johnny Walker didn't look like much, he moved around the ring gracefully, executing one wrestling hold after another. Then he grabbed my neck with both hands and yanked my head into a front facelock. When he locked his fingers, he bore down, applying pressure. I was surprised that the rassling was becoming a little serious as the facelock rearranged my nose and jaw. After a minute or so, he let me go. Not until later did I realize that I was being tested, that Ray was determining the nature of my interest - serious commitment or frivolous curiosity? The curiosity syndrome was a common problem in the recruitment of wrestlers, I learned later. After the brief workout, Ray pumped me up with an enthusiastic prognosis. "You're a natural," he said. "You'll be great. Let's see how things go, but if you develop like I think you can, this will be a great opportunity for you." I looked around the old,

empty arena, not responding. “Jim, do you really want to try this?” Ray asked. “Yeah,” I answered, “What kind of money can I make?” I was curious about the money because I’d heard pro wrestling was pretty lucrative. “We’ll guarantee you $350 or $400 a week and then you can get up to make some big money,” Ray said. Of course, nothing was said about contracts, and I just assumed they’d give me one to sign later.

At that point, I got real enthusiastic. I was looking at pro wrestling from two different perspectives. First, I had football as a base and in the off-seasons, I could stay in physical condition from just the exercise, and that appealed to me. Second, I’d been a kind of closet wrestling fan over the years since watching it on TV in Pittsburgh. So, wrestling was attractive at a couple of levels, and there seemed to be some good money in it - I’d already heard that some wrestlers were making $100,000 a year. It had been an interesting few minutes. I guess because I didn’t whimper when Johnny Walker crushed my face, moving around the 18 foot square and trying countermoves, I convinced them I was a worthy student. Later, Ray gave me the phone number for Karl and Hildegaard’s wrestler supply shop in Ohio, and told me to order some wrestling boots and a couple pair of trunks. He said to pick whatever color I wanted. “By the way, Jim, your first match will be Monday night in Augusta. Talk to Leo Garibaldi, he’s the referee,” Ray said.

The evening of my tryout with Johnny Walker, Nita and I went to the wrestling matches in downtown Atlanta for a closer look. As I watched El Mongol, Dandy Jack, Tim Woods, Tarzan Tyler and some other wrestlers perform, I was thinking about the earlier session with Ray and Johnny Walker. For one thing, Ray had used some language that was totally foreign. I acted more knowledgeable than I really was when he said, *“Everything’s a work”* and *“your gimmick is the football thing and your finish should be a football tackle”* I didn’t know what he was talking about until later, when I started spending time with the wrestlers. So that evening, I found myself trying to unravel my new off-season adventure. As I watched the matches, I wondered about how these guys did a piledriver without hurting the guy whose head goes into the mat; then one wrestler jumped off the ropes onto the other guy’s throat, and I wondered about that, too. A lot of this stuff looked dangerous. Then, a couple of wrestlers were bleeding, and that surprised me. Nothing had been said about blood, and I

thought they probably used capsules. At the end of the evening when we left our box seats next to Ray and his wife Ann and some of the wrestlers' girlfriends, I realized I didn't know very much yet about my new career that would begin in 48 hours.

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Monday night came and as I sat lacing my boots in the Augusta Auditorium dressing room, I felt uncomfortable. For one thing, I had just learned *wrestlers don't wear jockstraps.* They don't like the way the straps show through the trunks, so they wear two pair of tights. The inside tights are tighter. But more importantly, I was about to make my debut in front of 2,500 people and I knew absolutely nothing about pro wrestling.

My boots laced, referee Leo Garibaldi walked over to me with another wrestler in tow. Leo had been a wrestling star with his father Gino and two uncles, Chick and Ralph, as tag team partners in the 1950s. Now, Leo was not only the referee but the circuit's *booker* - he wrote the scripts. Ray had assured me that Leo would tell me all I needed to know. "Jim, this is Louie Tillet," Leo said. Louie Tillet (Louie Michaud) was to be my opponent even though he was about five foot six, real short. I was about twice his size. As we shook hands, I tried not to stare at his forehead, an ugly, pulpy mass of scar tissue; I later learned that Louie did *blade jobs* every night of the week. But they matched me with Louie because he was already *over.* He was a French Canadian, in his 40 s then and had been around for a long time, but he was one hell of a *worker.* He could *work* a crowd - get them up and bring them down. He was a fiery little guy and one of wrestling's really good actors.

The wrestling business follows a number of institutionalized practices for almost everything it *sells,* even an unknown face. When a newcomer is to be used credibly, he is matched with opponents or tag partners who are already *over* - which means they are already accepted by the fans. Of course, newcomers are not always used this way; some must play the role of *jobber* or *gebroney* (or *job-broney)* - wrestling lingo for guys who always lose. "Jim, we want you and Louis to do a 20- minute *broadway,"* Leo said. "Any questions, guys?" Louie nodded Garibaldi away. I didn't know what

he was talking about. Louie could see my confusion, and he translated for me. “Jim, they want us to go to a 20-minute draw.” We then sat down and Louie talked about what we would do during those 20 minutes. “Kid, just listen to me. I’ll *lead the match.* I’ll *carry* you,” he said. “Just listen to me, and I’ll tell you what to do. While we talked, other wrestlers on the card were also off in pairs discussing their matches. Leo went to each pair in the room, telling them their time and *finish.*

On the way to the ring, I surveyed the faces in the crowd, carefully stepping around brown pools of fresh tobacco juice on the floor. My appearance had not been advertised or announced in advance, and Augusta fans didn’t know whether to boo or cheer as I walked the short distance to the ring steps. Since I didn’t wear a hat or outrageous costume and was young and athletic looking, they assumed I was a *babyface* but were not certain. The ring announcer put the uncertainty aside:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, introducing in this corner, making his professional wrestling debut, Big Jim *Wolfson* - The All American Kid from the University of Georgia and the Atlanta Falcons.”

As my mouth dropped open in surprise, the crowd welcomed me warmly with applause and sympathy. While I wondered what the hell happened with my name, the bell clanged and the match began. Louie and I went into the obligatory referee’s hold, and then he punched me in the stomach to make me double up; when I leaned over from the blow to my abdomen, he clamped on a headlock. I pushed him away easily into the ropes, and when he came off the ropes, I grabbed him in a headlock. I tried to flex my arm and make the muscles bulge without hurting Louie. And I grimaced to show the fans how hard I was grinding Louie’s scarfaced head. And then - I couldn’t think of anything else to do! I froze. Louie had told me in the dressing room to listen to him, that he would *lead the match* and tell me what to do in the clinches. But Louie was so short and his head, as I cradled it in a headlock at about thigh level, was so far away that I couldn’t hear what he was telling me. I had absolutely no idea about what I was going to do for twenty minutes, which is a lifetime when you’re standing nearly naked on an elevated platform under bright lights in the middle of two thousand people who are watching and waiting for you to do something. And I couldn’t hear Louie’s instructions or think of another move.

I kept Louie in a headlock for the entire 20 minutes. He would flail his arms and twist his body and break loose, throwing me into the ropes; I'd come off the ropes, grab his neck and latch on the headlock again. Every so often the referee would call out the time. "Fifteen minutes to go *boys,* fifteen minutes." And what seemed like an hour later, the referee said, "Ten minutes to go *boys,* ten minutes." Another headlock, broken and into the ropes. Headlock again. "Five minutes to go *boys,* five minutes." Headlock, into the ropes, headlock again. I worried the fans could see how nervous and fumbling I was. "One minute to go *boys,* one minute." Finally, the bell clanged. It was over but I was exhausted, huffing and puffing so hard that my skin was red. To my surprise, the fans cheered but I had *blown up,* I learned later. When I stumbled out of the ring toward the back, the crowd clapped and small groups of young boys and adolescent girls raced toward me for autographs and to touch. I learned about the touching - they like to touch *after* the match when a *babyface* wrestler's body is wet and warm.

Back in the dressing room, both Louie and Leo Garibaldi laughed about our Twenty Minute Headlock Broadway. They told me not to worry about it, that I'd catch on soon. "Kid, you're gonna go places. Just watch and listen," Leo said. "It will come. And, by the way, don't dress yet." I didn't have the guts to ask him why they changed my name to *Wolfson.* Leo said he wanted to use me again later in the show to run to the ring and make a *save,* to rescue another *babyface* from *heel* mayhem. So I did that, too, and the fans went crazy. Now, they *knew* I was a *babyface* to be cheered and loved. More applause. And more touching. Was I *over?* Not yet. That would take awhile but with the scriptwriter's help, I was on my way.

Chapter 3

C A R E A N D F E E D I N G O F A B A B Y F A C E

WHEN I TOLD Nita that pro wrestling would produce some good off-season income for us and help me stay in shape for football, she didn't say much. She was busy with our two kids - three-year old Josh and Suzanne, who was two - and organizing our new home in north Atlanta. Nita's only reservation about wrestling was that I could get injured and have to quit my primary occupation, which was playing pro football. When she specifically asked one night if I'd thought about getting hurt, I pulled close to her, lowering my voice to a whisper. It was to be the first time I betrayed the covenant of *kayfabe.*

"Look, you've got the *heels* and the *babyfaces* and it's all show business! But you don't ever talk about it. This is my job and our livelihood, and you never discuss it. Let people think what they want to think," I said. Nita just winked, giggled and rolled her dark, flashing eyes. When I told my mother why I quit selling insurance in the football off-season, she asked me if I knew what I was doing. With a little ice in her voice, she said, "You're wrestling?" I explained I was going to stay in shape for football and the money was good. She said to look after myself. I'm sure she didn't approve, but it was too late.

My real introduction to the wrestling business began after that first match in Augusta. After the crowd left that night, the wrestlers divided into two groups and climbed into cars for the 120 mile drive to Savannah. The *heels* got into one car and I joined the *babyfaces* in Leo Garibaldi's green 1967 Olds, four-door 98. This traveling arrangement was a very old and important norm in the wrestling business where appearances are taken seriously. Leo drove the carload of *babyfaces* into the warm darkness and along the way, stopped at an all-night grocery store. "Kid," he said, "*Are you ready for your first bologna blowout?'* "Sure, whatever that is," I

replied. “Well, come on, I’m fixin’ to show you.” I followed him and other wrestlers into a small, smelly store and watched as they loaded their arms with bread, cold cuts and six packs of beer. This was to be their dinner and their breakfast, and they wouldn’t eat again until noon the next day. They did this six nights a week, and I was amused by the careful dietary practices of these great athletes. I wondered if I should tell them about how well the Falcons and 49ers ate during training camp. I passed over the bread and bologna, but I drank their beer.

As we drove toward Savannah, Leo told me he was going to have me work tag matches with Johnny “Rubberman” Walker as my partner for the next several nights in different towns. It would be the same script each night so I’d get some practice. That afternoon, Johnny and I went over to the Savannah arena early to rehearse that evening’s match. In fact, Johnny worked with me at length for several weeks, and he was my first teacher in professional wrestling. But I was learning on the go - unlike today, when they actually train you in both moves and ring psychology and interviews before they put you on an arena show. In those days, Johnny was a prelim wrestler, a $250 a week guy. But he was a skilled performer, and he was willing to teach me at Ray Gunkel’s request. Johnny taught me arm drags and hip tosses, encouraging me to relax and give my body to him. That’s the first thing to learn in wrestling - getting loose, giving your body to the opponent and then helping him by anticipating the move.

At first, my body was stiff and unconvincing. It may surprise some to learn that *working* is not as easy as it sounds, and practically all beginning wrestlers are regarded as *crowbars* - wrestling lingo for guys whose bodies are difficult to *work* with. Johnny showed me how to put yourself up in the air for a dropkick that just taps the opponent and how to perform a piledriver - “Just let me put my head between your knees, and you sit on your ass,” Johnny said. Of course you don’t just *do* a piledriver or dropkick or any other wrestling move without telling your opponent ahead of time. You whisper to the other guy, “Dropkick off the ropes” just seconds before. Wrestlers talk to each other during the match, usually in the clinches where tangled arms or legs cover the wrestlers’ mouths. But there is constant communication in the ring between the wrestlers and the referee. The maneuvers are intricate and they require practice. And most of all, timing. Bodies smack and fly and wrestlers sometimes get hurt. But these occasions

are accidents. The more proficient you become, the fewer the injuries. But it's physical pantomime and tenacious tumbling. A brutal ballet in the stuntman's soap opera but it's all showbiz, of course.

It was decided by Ray Gunkel that I would use two finishing holds - the Flying Football Tackle and the over-the-shoulder (Human Torture Rack) backbreaker. So, Johnny tutored me on how to perform both maneuvers, showing me how to go into the three-point stance near one of the ring corners, so there'd be room, and then charge at the guy, giving him a big *bump* across the upper chest. By the time I wrestled The Turk in Macon in March 1968, I was being billed in the newspaper ads as a "devastating blocker and deadly tackler." Thanks to Johnny, who told me to watch the other matches on each evening's card before and after mine. "If you see something you like," he said, "try it yourself and incorporate it." So, John F. Walker was my first close friend in pro wrestling. He was a tough guy who spoke his mind but an honorable gentleman, which was (and still is) rare in the wrestling business. He had wrestled for the Navy while in the service, but he was never popular in pro wrestling until he later put on a mask in 1972 and wrestled as Mr. Wrestling II alongside Tim Woods as Mr. Wrestling in Georgia. Johnny was prematurely bald and earlier in his career, he was told he didn't have *the look.* When he put on the *sock* in Georgia, he drew big crowds for many years and made Georgia promoters a lot of money; Johnny's earnings went from $250 a week to $2,000 and his biggest fan was Miz Lillian Carter, Jimmy Carter's mother who attended his matches in Columbus. Before Carter became President, Miz Lillian had a limousine bring Johnny to her house for a private meeting - with his mask on; later, she invited him to attend Carter's inauguration in Washington, but he didn't go when the Secret Service told him he'd have to leave his mask at home. Johnny finally retired in the late 1980s after 35 years in The Business. By then he was over 60 but had saved his money and moved with his wife to Hawaii for a well deserved retirement.

In the late 1960s, Georgia wrestlers were organized into two tours because two wrestling shows were staged six nights a week. After Savannah, my group backtracked to Macon. Then, to Athens, my old University of Georgia stomping ground. Friday night was the big show in Atlanta at the City Auditorium. My first match there was an opening event against Jack "The Neck" Vansky, an old-timer who wrestled main events

with Bruno Sammartino in Pittsburgh when I was in college. At that point, Vansky was in the twilight of his career - in his 50s, out of shape and a little pathetic looking. Leo gave us our instructions: "*Jim's going over in six minutes with his football tackle, clean in the middle*," he said. As instructed, Vansky laid down after six minutes.

Nita was in the audience that night, sitting with the other wrestlers' wives and girlfriends, and waved to me as I walked to the ring. She was starting to enjoy the feuds and the crowd behavior, along with her dad and little brother Jimmy. On the way home, I told Nita I was paid $150 for the six-minute match, and she was impressed. Then she said that during intermission, she'd walked over to Leo, waving a program at him. "Leo," she said, "His name is Jim WILSON, not WOLFSON!" Nita was bothered that the program identified me with a wrong name. I didn't know whether it was a mistake or whether they thought that Wolfson would *get over* better than Wilson. Leo acknowledged the mistake and I became Big Jim Wilson, The All-American Kid. And although the highlight of the evening was the Torres brothers' winning the Georgia tag team championship from El Mongol and Tarzan Tyler, the Atlanta newspapers' account of the wrestling show was headlined: JIM WILSON WINS MATCH. Which is why Ray Gunkel wanted me in wrestling.

The next morning, a Saturday, we jumped in the cars and sped to Columbus to tape a television show there, and then raced back to tape another show in Atlanta. On Saturday nights, we did a *spot* show in Carrollton or Griffin or one of the other small towns in which wrestling was staged on an occasional basis. We wrestled six nights a week, but three times on Saturdays. By the time I returned to Augusta for the next Monday night card, I was a different wrestler. After two weeks, Ray Gunkel walked over to me in the dressing room one night. "Hey, you look like you like it," he said. "Yeah, it's a lotta fun," I replied. "Well, we think you've got a great future in The Business. *You have a great background in football, you're big, you have a good body and you can talk - you're perfect for a world champion.* You just need more experience," Ray said. And Ray began making down payments on his promise by giving me an envelope each week. Inside the envelope was another hundred dollars in cash.

I learned later it is customary for wrestling newcomers to spend a period of apprenticeship, to pay the proverbial dues by taking pinfalls and

bumps for other more senior wrestlers whose careers are being orchestrated for success or failure. Typically, a wrestler gets the *push* from a promoter only after he has developed a following, which ordinarily takes a while. In my case, however, this custom was abandoned, and it caused resentment among some more experienced wrestlers who hadn't yet been given the *push.* I was permitted to win or draw and when I was instructed to lose, it always involved losing in a way that wouldn't hurt my popularity - being victimized by an opponent's illegal tactics or a referee's incompetence or by a gang of *heels* who attacked me from outside the ring. A *screw-job finish,* they called it. It was then, for the first time, that I understood the power of the promoter and the *booker:* they held the baton, and determined which direction it waved; they could willfully make you or break you. And they were *putting* me *over* quickly.

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I found the wrestlers' lifestyle odd, unlike anything I had known or seen. To say there aren't many lines of work like it is extreme understatement. Wrestlers' waking hours are usually filled with long, monotonous car rides from one town to another. The travel was a real grind, nothing like what I had seen in pro football where you live somewhere and travel once a week at the most, to play a game. But in wrestling, you're on the road constantly, and Nita and the kids didn't like that. It was a lot of traveling, and these long car trips were not pleasant - a two-door sedan stuffed with four or five sweating behemoths smoking cigars and belching and farting a stale stench of last night's beer and bologna. But in driving up and down the Georgia backroads, I learned much more than just how to wrestle. These long car rides introduced me to a strange and secret society with its own language, customs and rules. I watched and I listened, and other *babyfaces* took a liking to me because there wasn't anybody else like me around at the time. And I became a part of this traveling circus, not just a bystander.

At first, I didn't understand much of what other wrestlers said - like, *"the angle is the dangle that heats the meat"* One day, we passed a bad car wreck on the road, and one of my companions said, "Geez, look at the

bump that guy took!" They spoke in a peculiar code or argot that came from the carnival, they said. Among the favorite words used in everyday wrestler conversation was *kayfabe,* which at first sounded like it was the name of someone's girlfriend. No, it has a simple but slightly chilling meaning: *Silence!* More specifically, it means *keep quiet* about The Business. The seriousness with which The Business took the prohibition against talking about its secrets was explained to me often and emphatically by virtually every wrestler I met: You *protect* The Business at any cost! It was a peculiar way to begin language lessons, I thought: *the first thing you learn is the code of silence.* Later on, I came to understand that the insular world that wrestlers occupy is filled with secrets that coexist with a tremendous tribal loyalty to their profession, a real brotherhood. Inside the cars, wrestlers talked openly about the wrestling life. *" This can be the greatest business in the world or the worst,"* Johnny said. Others agreed. They didn't talk much about how wrestling could be the worst business, but instead talked about opportunities for travel and partying and making big money. The champion is the guy who makes the big money, I learned. Which is why all the wrestlers want to be the champ, even though its phoney.

The compulsive secrecy and paranoia about exposure was, I thought, a strange obsession, but it made me constantly aware of who I was and what I did. Privately, I believed wrestlers generally held illusions about the gullibility of wrestling fans. Didn't everyone already know? The wrestling world contained a strange dual ignorance: whose illusions were larger - the fans' or the wrestlers'? Other wrestlers probably knew I'd be a target for newspaper interviews because of football, and were worried about what I might say. "*Talk about how tough it is, but protect The Business,"* I was told. It was apparent the wrestlers had profound affection for their occupation and believed revelations to the wrong people would spoil a great thing for all of them. At about this time, I saw similarities between pro wrestling and the mafia - the mob called its code of silence, *omerta;* in wrestling, it was *kayfabe.* But it was the same thing, an internal gag order.

One of my first traveling companions was another one of the circuit's masked sensations, Mr. Wrestling (Tim Woods). Tim had been a Big Ten collegiate wrestling champion as George Burrell Woodin. He was good looking and athletically talented, and was the first of the few pro wrestlers I met who had a legitimate wrestling background. Tim was then the Georgia Heavyweight Champion, and he offered advice and encouragement. One piece of advice Tim gave was to avoid special challenge matches against local bullies from the audience. These matches were usually staged when there was a local crisis of confidence in wrestling's legitimacy. What they did was get one of the *boys* who could *shoot,* like Tim, and then let members of the audience challenge him. If the fan could stay in the ring with the wrestler for ten minutes without getting pinned, he won $1,000. These bouts were not, of course, a *work.* Tim had such a match one time in Columbus, Georgia, and his opponent proved to be a lot tougher and nastier than Tim expected. The guy was about six-feet four and 250 pounds and, after stalling for awhile, Tim got him in the middle of the ring and was ready to pin him. At the count of two, the guy bit Tim's finger off - his teeth gnawed completely through the tip of the finger at the metacarpal joint - and spit it out in the ring. Tim realized he was in a fight for his life and the only thing he could think of doing was *hooking the* guy's eye. *Hooking the eye* is where you stick your finger into the socket and pop the eye out. That's real brutality and viciousness, and it rarely occurs in pro wrestling, of course. Well, some other wrestlers were watching all this, and when they saw Tim try to *hook* his eye, they jumped into the ring and stopped the match. Tim was an impressive guy but what impressed me most about him was his $40,000 to $50,000 annual income. At the time, I was making $25,000 in pro football, busting my ass, but Georgia's pro wrestling champion was making about twice that for *acting* like he was busting his ass. And losing an occasional fingertip.

During that first year in wrestling, my tag partners were often Johnny Walker in the small towns and Tim in the larger cities. I also wrestled with Bob Armstrong (Robert James, a Marietta fireman) and the Torres brothers, Enrique and Alberto, who were then a popular tag team in the Georgia territory. Enrique Torres was in his early 60s and no longer did *bumps,* but he also helped me learn by offering advice and encouragement. I was surprised at how many wrestlers were fat slobs or older guys, men who were either without physical ability or well beyond the peak of athletic skill,

although it did not then occur to me that older wrestlers were still at it because they needed the money.

When Lou Thesz, then 52, came into the territory, I worked as his partner in tag matches and we traveled together from town to town, talked and drank beer. Lou was one of wrestling's legendary figures, having been its world champion for many years between 1937 and 1966. He had been all over the world and had been as successful as anyone in the 30 years he wrestled. Lou had dropped the world *strap* to Gene Kiniski two years earlier, and now he roamed wrestling's *gasoline circuits,* they were called, with the rest of us. He was a remarkable physical specimen for his age, but I was more impressed with how promoters treated the old champ, deferentially taking him to the best restaurants and expensive hotels with waiting women. I got the impression Lou thought himself a great man, although I later learned his self esteem was undeserved.

In more than 70 matches that spring, I wrestled about half singles matches and half tag teams. Most of my opponents *gave me the office* when we wrestled, signaling that I was working too *stiff,* unintentionally, I was a *crowbar,* and I was teased about it in the locker rooms as I eventually learned how to *work* more loosely. Although I didn't expect it, I also learned the daily lot of pro wrestlers is filled with aches and pains. Even though wrestlers try not to hurt themselves in the course of their work, the nightly *bumps* and *jumps* (travel) take their toll. Like football, wrestling is hard on the body, especially the knees and other joints. All the wrestlers I knew packed pain medication inside their shaving kits - along with razor blades, bandages, a pair of scissors and a blue and white tube of Mycitracin for *blade* wounds. Like pro football in the late 1960s and early 1970s, nearly everybody smoked pot and popped pills, although steroids and cocaine weren't around yet in a big way. But wrestlers' daily life also involved filling up big chunks free time. A wrestling match usually took no longer than five to 20 minutes, so there was a lot of time to fill. Some of this involved lying in the sun or weight work in a gym - both designed to keep the wrestler looking good. Wrestlers understood their appeal was determined largely by a tanned, supple body.

The only genuine spontaneity in the wrestlers' life occurred after the arena lights were turned off each evening. After the matches, the fun began. Partying. As in pro football, these occasions were down- and-dirty - the

wrestlers' playtime was just as raunchy as in pro football. In wrestling, however, you don't go off on your own. You party with other wrestlers - the same guys you *work* with in the ring and talk to during those long car rides and with whom you share those deep secrets. And wrestlers not only partied together, their tribal loyalty led them to share the female groupies, called *ring rats* or *arena rats.* Of course, each week's tour was rat-infested, and wrestlers didn't have to spend time finding them because they were everywhere - at hotels, in bars, standing outside locker rooms or waiting without underwear in cars parked outside the arena. Although most wrestlers understood that too much drinking would adversely affect their bodies, the same could not be said for sex which was practiced as often as possible. And it wasn't only driven by libido; part of the wrestlers' endless mating is economically motivated, staying with a girl was a lot cheaper than sleeping and eating in hotels and most wrestlers didn't make a lot of money. Wrestling was a *skin game* in more ways than one. Not all wrestlers were heterosexual, but they also were sexually active. On one occasion, a gay wrestler came onto me in the showers and I ignored him. This particular guy was part of a famous wrestling family and was so agile - "double-jointed" - he fellated himself, which was a remarkable performance. Some wrestlers were bisexual, and hustled after the matches. Which wasn't much different from the guys who sought girls to save money on travel expenses. But none of this was regarded as peculiar. After all, wrestling is a con. Wrestling *is* whoring, I would learn later - and *everything is a work.*

Wrestlers want to be paid for everything, and they'll try to *work* anybody. One night after a match in Atlanta, a fan approached me to say, "Hey Jim, I've got some jewelry. Are you or Ray interested?" At the time, I was so naive I didn't know what he was talking about. When another guy offered me a truckload of TVs a few weeks later, I figured out what was going on: some of the Georgia wrestlers were regularly trading in blackmarket TVs, jewelry, furniture and porno films - whatever scam was out on the street was common knowledge among some wrestlers. They weren't stealing this stuff, but operated as fences who moved the merchandise down the line. When I asked one of the *boys* about it, he said anybody who could bring something in would get a commission. As a middle class kid from suburbia, I'd never seen this side of the tracks but I figured the wrestlers' reputation as con men made them candidates for other scams as well. Or maybe it was because wrestlers weren't paid so well.

Whatever it was, all the Georgia wrestlers knew where to go to buy speed, pain pills, TV sets, furniture and jewelry - wholesale. One of Georgia's referees specialized in porno films. But nobody in the wrestling fraternity worried about it or thought it dangerous.

At about this time, I realized that people in wrestling had a strange view of the world, one that was new to me. As a guy who'd grown up in a big city and had seen a lot of crazy stuff in connection with collegiate and pro football, I thought I was worldly and streetsmart until I entered pro wrestling's subculture, where I felt naive. An innocent *babyface.* In time, I became surrounded by the con game mentality - a world populated by *marks,* where everything's a scam, a *work.* Which is why, I guess, wrestlers carried guns. I first noticed the wrestlers' arsenal early on. In the locker rooms, they kept a revolver wrapped in a towel inside their gym bags, on top of other stuff. Just before a guy would go into the arena for his match, he'd take his money and jewelry and pistol, put it inside one of those purple Crown Royal velvet bags, and hand it to one of the brothers for safekeeping during the match. When traveling, wrestlers placed their pistols under the car seat. Virtually all wrestlers did this, and so did I.

One day while on a trip with Johnny Walker and Tim Woods, one of them said, "Shit man, you've gotta get yourself a piece!" A few days later, I went down to the Fulton County courthouse in Atlanta and took out a tote permit for a nice little Army issue chrome plated Colt.45. I didn't know anything about pistols, and had never liked the things they are used for, but I got a piece. Later, I got another one, a .38 Smith and Wesson. Then another one, a chrome plated German Luger; then a .44 Magnum. Pretty soon I was buying rifles. Eventually, I accumulated so many guns, I had to get a gun rack in my house. Then I had to get a cabinet so I could lock this arsenal up to protect my kids because I was now gone most of the time. It was at this point when Nita began to resent my involvement in wrestling and when I bought the gun cabinet, she said I'd gone crazy, and I had. It was all part of my indoctrination into pro wrestling.

With all these armed wrestlers wandering around the country, it was surprising there weren't some shootings, accidental or not. But the only time I saw wrestlers use their weapons was on the long car trips. Occasionally, we'd pull off the road to lay in the sun and drink beer. We'd be lying there with our shirts off, and every once in a while one of the

wrestlers would pick up his pistol and shoot a squirrel or rabbit. On another occasion, we were driving between towns in Florida. There were a lot of buzzards down there. As we guzzled our beer, we rolled down the windows, stuck our guns out and shot buzzards. I never asked why wrestlers carried guns, and I still don't know. I guess it has to do with the macho mentality and the con philosophy. It was a peculiar world built upon layers of deception and illusion, *wrestlers don't wear jockstraps, but they arm themselves with guns.* The wrestlers' world was as unreal as their trade.

But I also met some terrific people in The Business. One gem of a man I met in my first year of wrestling was Joe Scarpa, a veteran wrestler who lived in Griffin, Georgia. Joe had some nice guns, too. A year or so later, he ran into the dressing room one night, excited. "Jim, I got my big break. I'm going to New York as an Indian. I got a call from Vince McMahon and I went out and bought all my feathers," Joe said. Shortly later, I saw him wrestling on TV and recognized his pictures in the wrestling magazines. Joe Scarpa, the nice Italian boy from New Jersey with the big nose, became Chief Jay Strongbow and a world tag team champion for Vince McMahon, Sr. Years later, after Scarpa grew old and fat, he was fired by McMahon and then became my world champion tag team partner in my own promotion (as I discuss later). Today, Joe works behind the scenes for Junior McMahon's WWF.

When Bobo Brazil (Houston Harris) came to the Georgia territory for his annual week of bookings, I was impressed with the guy. He began wrestling in 1953 and was large, muscular and handsome. As a football player, I was accustomed to seeing big, muscular men and Bobo was one of the first of these I encountered in wrestling. He was probably six feet seven and he must have weighed 270, and I wondered why he wasn't a defensive end somewhere in pro football. Bobo was the first black wrestler I met and like other black wrestlers, was required to enact racial caricatures and stereotypes. Bobo's signature racial *gimmick* was his feared cocoa butt, just an ordinary *worked* head butt but it *told a story* - that since you can't hurt blacks' thick skulls, you have to beat them with leglocks and footholds

where they are weak and vulnerable. Shortly after I began wrestling I had asked another wrestler, “How come there aren’t any black guys around?” I was told, “There ain’t no black guys in the business - that’s the way the promoters want it.” That wasn’t exactly true, of course; there had been black wrestlers over the years, but not many. This was curious in light of the many black wrestling fans in the south and when Bobo Brazil made his annual Georgia tour, local promoters could bank on a string of sellouts, especially in places like Augusta and Savannah where there were lots of black wrestling fans. But I was surprised to learn that Bobo was paid only $300 a night plus travel expenses; in those days, a sellout in Atlanta of 5,500 tickets at $3 to $5 a ticket produced a gate of about $20,000 and paying the main attraction 1% to 2% seemed peculiar. Although Bobo earned good money, it didn’t seem proportionate to the gates he was drawing. But Bobo never fussed about his money; he had learned to be a *good boy*, which is why promoters liked him. But Bobo was in pain, which is why he used Canadian Club - half a quart before his match and the other half afterward. He was never drunk because of his size, I guess, just a little high. I would later learn much more about how wrestler *payoffs* were calculated as well as the experiences of black wrestlers.

My involvement with Georgia wrestling also included TV work as a commentator on Ray Gunkel’s weekly TV show, *Live Atlanta Wrestling* on Atlanta’s WQXI-TV, channel 11. It was a 60-minute show on Saturdays used to hype the weekly Friday night cards at Atlanta City Auditorium. Ray asked me to join announcer Ed Capral as a *babyface* commentator in 1968. Our TV routine was defined by Ray who gave Capral a sheet of paper with all the matches’ times and instructions to ask me questions so I could ad lib answers. My special assignment was to talk about how tough pro wrestling was - to lie, in other words. I was told to appeal to kids by reciting All-American virtues of hard work and fair play and, of course, the traditional wrestling-on-TV-caveat: “Now kids, don’t try these holds on your brothers or sisters. You have to learn how to wrestle, first, and you have to get a good coach at school.” I was being exploited, but I went along with it.

Before I returned from the NFL's offseason to football, the wrestling industry's movers and shakers started visiting Ray Gunkel's weekly wrestling shows in Atlanta. Over successive weeks, my Friday night matches in Atlanta were observed by National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) bigshots - Eddie Graham (Edward Gossett), Sam Muchnick, Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson), Wilbur Snyder, Big Jim Crockett, Gene Kiniski and Dory Funk, Sr. These seven men constituted the NWA's leadership in the late 1960s: Graham had wrestled for 22 years before he became the millionaire promoter who *owned* the Florida territory; Muchnick was another wrestling millionaire, one of the founding fathers of the National Wrestling Alliance who *owned* the NWA's showcase promotion in St. Louis; Adkisson (Fritz von Erich) was the former SMU defensive tackle and champion discus thrower who wrestled and *owned* NWA promotions in Dallas and Ft. Worth; Snyder played football at Utah and for the Edmonton Eskimos in the early 1950s, wrestled for thirty years as one of the premier *babyfaces* and *owned* the Indianapolis area with Dick "The Bruiser" Afflis; four hundred and fifty pound Jim Crockett was the longtime *owner* of the NWA's lucrative North and South Carolina and Virginia territory, and Gene Kiniski, former Canadian football player was then NWA world champion with Dory Funk Jr. already in line to be the NWA's next champion.

At first, I couldn't believe these important people were coming all the way to Atlanta to see me, but the repeated introductions and dinners and airport pickups and drop-offs were so obviously staged I sensed I was being scrutinized for some future *program.* In each case, the wrestling world's bigshots patted me on the back, told me I was doing a great job and had a great future, and said they'd like me to wrestle in their territories. Both Graham and Crockett offered to be my personal *booker.* I was flattered, but I also already knew enough about The Business to understand that wrestling promoters were always looking for new faces with hard bodies, especially guys with claim to legitimate athletic accomplishment. It was no secret that a legit athlete in the ring helped The Business deal with its traditional problems in public confidence, and an active NFLer attracted sportswriters's interest and, therefore, publicity that wrestling promoters ordinarily had to buy. By now, I understood my special currency in pro wrestling, and they just sucked me right up. Just like they did with the 49ers' Leo Nomellini in the 1950s, I learned later. And I understood the approving nods and warm handshakes were all business, like the scrutiny of

buyers at a horse auction: I was simply being sized up in terms of bald economic promise - can Jim Wilson make us money? That's why Ray Gunkel wanted to have the NWA world championship given to me - he would sponsor me by putting up the escrow deposit in exchange for a cut of my earnings.

The night before I left for football training camp in June 1968, Ray Gunkel gave me a trophy intended to celebrate completion of my first season in wrestling. It was a large, bronze-plated statue of two wrestlers locked in combat. When he handed it to me, he said, "Jim, you're a true credit to The Business. You're my rookie of the year. *If you go with the program, we'll make you world champion.*" Along with my game balls from NFL football, I've also saved that old wrestling trophy.

When I returned to football in the summer of 1968, I expected to spend another hot and humid July in Johnson City, Tennessee at the Falcons training camp. Instead, I ended up in Fullerton, California at the Cal State football field, summer home of the Los Angeles Rams. With my rise to notoriety on the Georgia wrestling scene, it didn't take long for the Falcons to notice and they did not approve. Falcon management said they didn't want me wrestling; in fact, they told me I couldn't wrestle. When they said that, I decided I wasn't coming back to Atlanta because, for one thing, the Falcons were a terrible football team, having lost 12 games in the year I played with them. My relationship with Falcon management deteriorated after I used one of my weekly TV commentaries on Ray Gunkel's wrestling show to send them a message: I departed from the script when I told viewers the Falcons didn't want me to wrestle and if they couldn't accommodate me, they could either trade me or I'd play Canadian football. I guess I've always been stubborn and outspoken - *independent,* some said.

It was no coincidence when I got a phone call the following week from George Allen, head coach of the Los Angeles Rams. "Say Jim," Allen began, "We think it's great you're wrestling. In fact, a couple of our guys are doing the same thing. I'm all for it. It keeps you guys in shape." And then he said, "I guess you know, Jim, that we made a deal with the Falcons -

you've been traded!" I didn't know I'd been traded until Coach Allen told me so, but I welcomed it. Especially a trade to Los Angeles. While the Falcons were an .077 team, the Rams were a .917 team, having gone 11-1-2, winning the old Coastal Division championship. Under George Allen, the Rams had become an interesting, talented football team with Deacon Jones, Lamar Lundy, Merlin Olsen and Roger Brown - the *Fearsome Foursome* - and Dick Bass, Bernie Casey, Maxie Baughn, Charlie Cowan, Roman Gabriel, Ken Inman, Tom Mack, Tommy Mason, Myron Pottios, Joe Scibelli, Billy Truax, and Diron Talbert (later, my roommate in camp and on road trips). Once I got to Los Angeles, the two players I immediately befriended were Don Chuy and Joe Corollo, who wrestled for a few years in the football off-seasons as The Rasslin Rams. Corollo came from Notre Dame and I had played against Chuy when he was at Clemson, and they were both starters for the Rams.

On the first day of Rams' training camp in the summer of 1968, I heard Chuy hollering at me from across the field. "Hey, Wilson! You *gebroney!* Get over here and do *a job* for Corollo." I turned around, grinning, recognizing the *wrestlespeak.* "And we want you to *sell* for Corollo before you get the *ring rats,"* he laughed. They were *swerving* me, and it helped break the tension of starting football life over again with my new teammates. Later in the year the three of us put on an impromptu demonstration one day at practice during warmups. It was one of those hot southern California afternoons, and the whole team was starting to suffer quite a bit. We were doing calisthenics in pads when I walked over to Chuy and gave him a hip toss. The other Rams stopped their warmups, gathering around us to yell and scream and cheer, and when we did some more wrestling moves, someone yelled, "Hey Deke, why don't you get in there and wrestle those guys?" Deacon Jones, with mock seriousness, yelled, "Not me, man, not me - not that rasslin', brother!" And everyone hooted and howled.

After the Rams training camp broke, I brought Nita and the kids to Los Angeles where we rented a condo. It was a happy time for all of us when everybody had everything they needed or wanted with twoor three cars in the driveway, motorcycles, plenty of clothes and plenty of money. The weather was great, and I was happy to be playing on a good football team.

After joining the Rams, the coaches moved me back to offensive tackle. In moving back to offensive tackle, I needed additional work to polish the skills characteristic of the position, and Charlie Cowan, the first team offensive tackle, went out of his way to work with me. And Deke - Deacon Jones, who was the most accomplished football player I met during my years in pro football - stayed late to help me with pass blocking. Deke taught me how to defend against his headslap, a move still used legitimately in those days. He was the best in football, and no one turned games around individually the way he could by his presence, his moves and his leadership.

When we played the Packers in 1968, Charlie Cowan was injured and so I lined up across from All-Pro Willie Davis and played my heart out. It all came together for me that afternoon in Milwaukee, my day in a crisp October sun. I had a great game, shutting Davis out. It was then the Rams knew they had a player, and that victory over Green Bay is etched on my game ball and in my memory. I also received game balls for wins over Cleveland and Minnesota. The Rams finished the 1968 season at 10-3-1, losing the division championship to Baltimore in the final game of the year, 24 to 28. But the Rams were a team with spirit and unity, and I attributed that to George Allen. Coach Allen was a skilled football coach who could judge talent and create cohesion and his defensive knowledge was legendary, but he was also well organized, selecting the right combinations of players and coaches. Players respected him because he worked as hard or harder than they did. He not only did calisthenics and ran with the team, but he was paternalistic about how the players were treated by owner Dan Reeves. Allen talked to the owners about players' salaries, facilities and even food. If there ever was a model for the proverbial players' coach, it was George Allen. And it shouldn't have surprised anybody when Reeves fired Allen after the 1968 season. But the Ram players forced a showdown by threatening to *go if he goes,* and Allen stayed. It was the first and last time players controlled coaching changes in the NFL(Coach Allen died a few years ago and he was finally selected for the NFL's hall of fame in 2002).

By the end of that 1968 season, George Allen knew he could count on me in the following year as a starter and a team player. Before I left Los Angeles for the off-season, I told George I was going to be wrestling again

until training camp in the summer. “Good, stay in shape,” Allen said. And then, with a wink and a grin, he added, “And don’t get hurt!”

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I returned to wrestling in Ray Gunkel’s Georgia territory, and the *push* started the previous year was continued. By now, Leo Garibaldi had been replaced by Tom Renesto as Gunkel’s *booker.* Renesto had been a popular Mexican-American wrestler on the west coast for many years and when he turned 40 and soft, he revitalized his wrestling career by putting on a mask as The Assassin. His tag team partner was Jody Hamilton, Assassin #2, who pounded the mat for many years afterward. Renesto also *pushed* me, as Garibaldi had, although on one occasion, grudgingly. One night, Ray told Renesto to lose to me, and Renesto argued about it for a long time before he ultimately did what he was told to do.

A few weeks later, Ray said, “Jim, we want you to go to Florida to do some *shots* for Eddie Graham.” By now, I knew Graham was another wrestling promoter who liked to *push* legitimate athletes, and I’d been wondering when I would go to all those places where I’d been invited to wrestle the year before when the industry’s bigshots had stopped by Atlanta to watch me perform and size me up. But I assumed other promoters who wanted to use me would contact me, making the invitation formal; as an *independent contractor,* I didn’t expect to be told where and when I was going to wrestle. I had much to learn about how the wrestling business actually operates, and that second year brought on this higher education quickly. Lesson Number One: *There is no such thing as a wrestling independent contractor* - you do what you’re told, as in an *employee-employer* relationship.

Eddie Graham’s Florida circuit was popular with wrestlers for a couple of reasons. First, the weather was always great and this brought down the Canadian wrestlers like Tarzan Tyler and others who wanted to escape northern winters. Graham didn’t pay very well because he knew wrestlers would work for less where it was warm. The second had to do with a scam Graham was involved in. He had a standing offer to wrestlers to help them buy new cars at low interest rates on payments. Graham always said,

“Come to my territory and I’ll get you a new car.” So, wrestlers flocked to Florida for sunshine and wheels. When I flew to the Florida circuit, I renewed my friendship with Leo Garibaldi, now one of Eddie Graham’s *bookers.* Leo had taken a liking to me in Georgia and he greeted me warmly. “Kid, you’re gonna go places in this business,” he always said, and he introduced me to the country’s most feared tag team, The Texas Outlaws - Capt. Redneck Dick Murdoch (Hart Richard Murdoch) and Dusty Rhodes (Virgil Riley Runnels, Jr.). Murdoch died a few years ago, but Dusty is still performing his act today. Murdoch was an unforgettable character - a great *worker* with a terrible beer belly hanging below a toothless, tobacco juice-dripping face that only a mother could appreciate. By now, I was using one of my blue Rams warmup jackets as a ring costume, something envied by the hated Texas Outlaws. Murdoch and Rhodes acted like NFL groupies when we met, asking if I could get them a Rams T-shirt or sweatshirt. When I got them the shirts, they were real *babyfaces* and thanked me.

It was on my first Florida tour in 1969 when I met one of wrestling’s emerging stars - Jack Brisco (Freddie Joe Brisco). Jack was about six feet one and 215 and an accomplished collegiate wrestler who won an NCAA wrestling title in the 190 pound division while at Oklahoma State. He had been wrestling for only four years, starting with LeRoy McGuirk in Oklahoma where his first match was against Ronnie Garvin (Roger Barnes). Six months later, Jack wrestled in Tennessee and then went back to Oklahoma where he wrestled Danny Hodge, who often *stretched* guys but not Jack. After a tour of Australia, Jack ended up in Florida in the summer of 1968 at the suggestion of Joe Scarpa. Eddie Graham taught Jack how to perform a figure-four leglock, and *pushed* him by giving Jack the Florida Heavyweight title from Masa Saitothree months later. Even though Jack was known inside The Business as “the skinny boy from Oklahoma,” Jack’s pro wrestling career took off, orchestrated by Eddie Graham.

Jack and I took an immediate liking to each other. We hit it off right from the start, maybe because we both had legitimate athletic backgrounds, and each of us had been tagged by our respective mentors in pro wrestling for promising futures in The Business. That set us apart from the rest of the wrestling troupe. And in time, we discovered that we shared other common interests - fishing, hunting and long conversations over a few beers. But our relationship developed well beyond that of locker room and drinking

buddies. We became close, and it was Jack Brisco who introduced me to the *inside* of the wrestling business. On that first trip to Florida, I learned from Jack that Eddie Graham's rise to power within the wrestling industry was not a nice story, especially the circumstances under which he came to control the NWA's Florida circuit after the aging and longtime promoter "Cowboy" Luttrall was put away in a nursing home. But Jack told me defrauding heirs of wrestling promoters and various other forms of backbiting and backstabbing are not unusual in the wrestling business.

In a matter of weeks, I became Jack's companion as we not only wrestled, traveled and partied together but fished in Tampa Bay. When I first went to Tampa, Jack invited me to move out of the hotel and stay at his house with him and his blonde girlfriend Olga. Soon after that, I entered wrestling's inner circle, and I was in Tampa the night in February 1969 when Gene Kiniski dropped the world championship *strap* to Dory Funk, Jr. It was an historic occasion in pro wrestling: in those days, the NWA's world title did not change hands often and Kiniski had held the belt since Lou Thesz dropped it to him in 1966. After the wrestling show, Jack and the new world champion Dory Funk and I went out on the town for a few drinks. After the three of us found seats at a Tampa bar and ordered drinks, Dory reached under the table to grab the belt he just got off Kiniski and gently set it down on the table in front of us. I sneaked a look at Jack, whose stoneface didn't reveal a reaction but I thought, "Geez, these guys take their mythical championships as seriously as the fans." By now, our drinks had arrived and I ignored Dory's silly self-celebration because I was now off on my own - it was a heady experience to be bending elbows with wrestling's stars. But I also realized the reason I was so suddenly one of the brothers was because of pro football and their respect for athletic legitimacy which they hoped would rub off on their business. I'll never forget Dory's behavior that night, and later in the year when he came to Atlanta for his first championship defense in Georgia, Ray Gunkel asked me to pick him up at the airport and take him to dinner after his match. After the matches that night, we went to an Atlanta restaurant and Dory again carried his world title belt with him, now encased in a handcrafted leather satchel. With his belt on the table again, we had a pleasant dinner during which I tried to get Dory to talk about his experiences in wrestling, but he was bored with my questions and wanted me to tell him where the *ring rats* were. I told him where to go and wished him luck.

In addition to wrestling in Tampa, the NWA's Florida circuit wrestlers also did shows in West Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Orlando and Miami with occasional *spot* shows in Ft. Myers, Clearwater, Lakeland and Leesburg. The Florida tour also involved doing shows in Puerto Rico, Nassau and Freeport. For these trips, the *heels* flew commercial and the *babyfaces* traveled with Lester Fuller (Lester Welch), the NWA promoter for the Bahamas and who, like Graham and other promoters, owned his own airplane. Flying with Lester was a terrifying adventure because of his heart condition and his drinking, and he would routinely climb behind the stick with a drink in his hand. He also brought his girlfriend with him. It was on one of those trips when I met the second black man I'd seen in pro wrestling, Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson. When I asked about the guy, I was told that Patterson had no athletic background but was one of wrestling's hottest tickets because he had a hot racial *gimmick;* but I also learned from Jack Brisco that although Patterson drew money, he was a case study in how *not* to survive in the wrestling business: he was a troublemaker, constantly complaining about his money and having to take *bumps* or do *jobs* in his matches.

After that Florida tour, I returned to Georgia for a few more matches before going back to Rams' training camp. When I checked in with Ray Gunkel, he told me he had a new tag partner for me -

Little John, a six foot six, 270 pound hillbilly who wrestled in bib overalls. As corny as it sounded, Ray and his *booker* Tom Renesto were convinced they had a winning *gimmick* in the Big Jim and Little John tag team, and they *pushed* it. One night Little John and I had a match with Nick Bockwinkel and Paul DeMarco (Paul DeMarchi). It was a pretty good match - Bockwinkel was one of wrestling's truly smooth *workers* with a repertoire of moves executed fluidly, believably and without a hint of pain for his opponents. DeMarco, on the other hand, could be sloppy and this night he was. Near the end of the match, we were brawling and one of DeMarco's punches landed. A *potato,* wrestlers call it, right on the nose. When I got home that night, I looked like a raccoon with two black eyes. When Nita met me at the door, she laughed and laughed. "I thought you said this was all fake," she giggled.

Despite occasional aches and pains, I was now enjoying the wrestling business immensely, although I was bothered by a few things I'd seen

during this second year in wrestling. I wondered about this *independent contractor* cliche - how promoters could exercise so much control over a wrestler's bookings. This bothered me because I liked to wrestle close to home, where I could spend time with Josh and Suzanne and help Nita, who was then pregnant with our third child, Christina. I did enough traveling during football season to satisfy my vagabonding urge. Then, there was something else. One night I was wrestling in Macon, Georgia for local NWA promoter Fred Ward. Fred looked like the wrestling promoter caricature: a short, humorless fat man dressed in a baggy dark suit who smoked big, black cigars and rode around town in a long, shiny Lincoln. Crude and arrogant, he was the original small town big-shot with a Hitler complex. You never made much money with Fred, and I don't know why. He was the only Georgia promoter who charged admission for his TV tapings, held in an old building on River Street in downtown Columbus. Other promoters let fans in free for TV tapings, but old wily Fred sold Coke and popcorn and charged admission. I figured he picked up an extra $20,000 a year that was pure profit.

As I put on my trunks and listened to my instructions for that night's match, I was told I would *juice.* "No, I don't do that," I said. I had seen plenty of wrestlers perform the self-inflicted razor cuts from the beginning of my wrestling career. And it was one thing I had already decided not to do. I was about the only wrestler who didn't carry *blades* in my gym bag. I thought a lot of wrestling's stunts and skits bordered on tastelessness if not pathology and I regarded *juicing* as sick. Jack Brisco felt the same way, also refusing to *gig* himself for the same reason although he was in a stronger position to negotiate his noncompliance. After Fred Ward insisted, I borrowed a razor blade from another wrestler and cut it into pieces, wrapping one in tape. I stuffed the thing into my trunks and near the end of my match, I complied with instructions, nicking the bridge of my nose with the taped razor fragment. My *blade job* was so spectacular that Fred brought a photographer into the dressing room after the match to memorialize my bleeding for his wrestling bulletin. Years later, during a local version of the famous *20/20* exposé, Fred Ward appeared on Georgia television and denied he had ever asked me to cut myself saying, "I have never ever, talked to him." Sweet, big Fred. I wrestled for him for six years.

There was another incident shortly before I returned to the Rams, and it revealed another side of the wrestling business that surprised me. One night in Savannah, I wrestled Hans Schmidt (Guy LaRose), a Canadian who played the Nazi *heel* character in the early 1950s who became one of TV wrestling's hated villains. His *heelgimmick* was famous inside The Business, ever since he had so antagonized Chicago wrestling fans that some of them called the FBI, asking for an investigation of his anti-Americanism. Now, Schmidt was nearing the end of his career and I don't know what kind of medical condition he had but the night I wrestled him I didn't want to touch the guy. For one thing, Schmidt *worked* extremely *snug*, something I hadn't encountered very often; I thought it was unnecessary to have ears that looked like Schmidt's (or Lou Thesz's) and I *gave him the office* by squeezing twice on his leg, the traditional signal that he was hurting me. When Schmidt continued to *work stiff*, I whispered, *"Loosen up, fucker!"* Schmidt ignored me, while we continued to *work.* But my more serious problem with Schmidt was convincing myself to make contact with the most disgusting boils and sores all over his body. I couldn't believe someone in his condition would be permitted to wrestle since some of his lesions were open, oozing yellow pus. There were no health or safety standards in wrestling, and there was no medical supervision of wrestling nor physical exams of wrestlers in the state of Georgia; even in other states with athletic commissions, the perfunctory physicals were usually administered while the wrestler was dressed in street clothes, and those superficial exams wouldn't have detected Schmidt's condition anyway. The match with Schmidt ended not soon enough. We did a *double DQ finish* when both of us were counted out for fighting outside the ring.

When I returned to the Rams training camp in the summer of 1969, I was a starter in every exhibition game, including a fateful encounter with the Buffalo Bills and O.J. Simpson. Sometime during the third quarter, one of the Bills fell on my right knee. When I limped off the field, the trainers checked my knee at the bench and shot me up to go back in the game. We were losing at the time, and I wanted to stay in for the drive. We scored the

go-ahead touchdown, and I limped off the field again. While my teammates beat the Bills 51-20, I was taken to a hospital where I had knee surgery the next morning. George Allen said I was courageous to have played hurt, and gave me a game ball. And I looked at that ball often during the rest of the season as my teammates ran up a winning streak of 11 consecutive games until losing to Detroit and Minnesota late in the season. We won the division title with a 11-3 record, but lost to Minnesota in the Western Conference championship game. The 1969 Rams turned out to be the best football team I was part of, even though I was on injured reserve.

That knee surgery, and my shortened play because of it, didn't discourage Nita and me from enjoying our southern California lifestyle. And our family was growing again - that was the year Christina was born, and I was around our condo often enough to enjoy Christina's first months, along with Josh and Suzanne. It was a busy time at home, and we didn't get much sleep but that was the year Nita and I got involved with some of the Ram players' social activities. One of these was an informal dinner club of several players, coaches and their wives who met once a month at our homes on a rotating basis. One of the participants was Jim Nabors, who sang the National Anthem at all Ram games; years later, he performed *My Old Kentucky Home* each year at the Kentucky Derby. He was a real Rams fan, and routinely gave Ram players tickets to tapings of his *Gomer Pyle* TV show in Burbank. One night the monthly dinner party was hosted by Nabors at his mansion in Hollywood Hills. For that occasion, Nabors invited his friend Rock Hudson, who became the hit of the party. Hudson, then in his early 40s, had been among Hollywood's top ten box office attractions since he made all those movies with Doris Day and was about to begin a new career with TV's *Macmillan and Wife with Susan St. James* (now wife of Dick Ebersol, Vince McMahon's sometime partner in TV wrestling and the XFL on NBC-TV).

At some point late in the evening, Myron Pottios and my Rams roommate Diron Talbert were teasing Rock Hudson about liking men more than women, slightly taunting him that he was never with women outside his movies. Everyone laughed at how ridiculous it was to be teasing this good looking, masculine movie star about *that.* Although there had been locker room talk about Rock's interest in a certain Rams quarterback, this was long before public disclosure of Hudson's gay lifestyle or that of some

NFLers, such as the 49ers' Dave Kopay and Jackie Smith of the Redskins. The teasing went on for awhile, ending when Pottios and Talbert locked Hudson in the bathroom. Rock had to bang the door repeatedly to get out.

My surgically repaired knee healed well enough in the football off-season to return to wrestling in January. When I rejoined Ray Gunkel's Georgia circuit, his top blonde *heel* was Buddy Colt (Ronald Read) who wrestled in some areas as Cowboy Ron Reed. Colt had been a used car salesman in Tennessee, but he had a nice body, was a good *worker* and he gave antagonizing TV interviews. Five years later, Colt's career as wrestler came to a premature end when he was badly injured in a small airplane crash that killed wrestler Bobby Shane (Robert Schoenberger) and injured Austin Idol (Dennis McCord), Johnny Valentine (John Wisnoski) and Ric Flair (Richard Morgan Fleihr). I remember Colt well because he was one of the wrestlers who resented me for not having to pay dues before getting a *push.* Colt also disliked my refusal to do *blade jobs.* One night in the dressing room he looked over at me while we were dressing. "You gotta see red to get the bread, Big Jim," he sneered. I glanced back at him and smiled as he continued his little game. "When they say 'Bleed, baby', you'd better bleed. Bleed as much as you can," he smirked. But I ignored him and held my ground, knowing my friend Jack Brisco wouldn't do it either, and he'd already been told he was next in line for the NWA's world championship *strap.*

After wrestling on Ray Gunkel's Georgia circuit for a few weeks, I returned to Eddie Graham's Florida promotion. Graham had called Ray to arrange my Florida tour, and Ray approved it. Of course, Graham gave Ray a booking fee for my appearances. Then Graham called me. "Your ticket's in the mail. Come down on the 17th and go to the Bay Motel," he said. I was now bringing Nita and the kids with me to Florida for a vacation while I wrestled. It was a great time for us to be together because we could also visit my family in West Palm while we were all in the area. I also brought Nita and the kids to Savannah in the spring for a little vacation, while I wrestled in the area. For awhile, at least, wrestling lost out to family in the competition for my attention.

On this second tour of Florida, Graham started to give me the *push.* In some matches, I was still putting someone *over* but in such a way it didn't hurt me - *screw job* finishes. One of the guys they had me beat was Mr.

Saito, whose *gimmick* was the stereotypic salt-throwing, karate-chopping, sneaky Japanese *heel.* In reality, Masanori Saito represented Japan at the 1964 Olympics as a heavyweight freestyle wrestler. He lost in the second round of the Tokyo Olympics, turned professional a year later and came to Florida the year before I started wrestling. Saito was one of the best *shooters* to ever wrestle professionally, and he was *pushed* from the start. When I wrestled him in Tampa in 1970, he was told to lose *clean in the middle:* one, two, three, and he did. When I later became more reflective about The Business, I remembered Saito as a good example of how legitimate wrestlers are asked to sell their dignity and talents to wrestling promoters; he was never permitted to demonstrate his repertoire of wrestling moves and countermoves, and he was often told to be pinned by guys he could have defeated in a few seconds in a real wrestling match. Saito struck me as a sad and tragic figure, lost in a mean and nasty business. I could understand his anger. Years later, Saito spent a year in a Wisconsin prison with Ken Patera for trashing a fast food restaurant and beating up some cops in Waukesha after a match one night in 1984.

In the meantime, my appearances in Florida brought Eddie Graham free newspaper publicity when several sports columnists wrote about my NFL-wrestling connection, and Eddie Graham liked that. Eddie also knew that Jack Brisco and I had become good friends and one day when the three of us were fishing for mackerel in Tampa Bay on Graham's yacht, Graham offered to be my personal *booker* during the next football off-season in 1971. "Jim, I can get you booked in Madison Square Garden for Vince McMahon [Vince, Sr.]. Why don't you let me know," he said. Even in wrestling, Madison Square Garden was *the* single most desirable booking engagement in the entire country in the 1960s and 1970s. And it was tough to get booked into the Garden in light of the McMahon family's wrestling monopoly at the Garden and elsewhere in the northeast. But I knew Graham had that kind of power because Jack Brisco had done some Garden shows. I also knew about how generous Eddie Graham was with his star wrestlers - the envelopes stuffed with uncashed checks scattered around Jack's condo were hard not to notice. I told Graham I'd think about it, not volunteering I was also interested in continuing my relationship with Ray Gunkel who already said he would sponsor me for the world title by posting the champ's escrow deposit. I also didn't tell him I enjoyed being near home, where Josh was now 5, Suzanne was 4 and Christina was just starting to walk. I really

loved playing with my three kids who provided a busy but happy time for Nita and me.

A week or two later, I was standing around the Tampa National Guard Armory one night after the matches, waiting for Jack Brisco to finish a conversation with Graham before we went out on the town. The crowd had left, and Jack and Graham and Dusty Rhodes and another couple of wrestlers were huddled by the armory wall underneath a big, steel-framed window. One of the wrestlers climbed a ladder up the wall and was working on the window frame with a screwdriver. Suddenly, the huge window frame came crashing down on the floor, spraying glass everywhere. Shortly afterward, Jack said he was ready to leave and we walked out of the Armory. When I asked Jack about what the deal was with the window, Jack explained: Eddie Graham had been having trouble with his eyes, some optic nerve damage from all the *blade jobs* he'd done over the years. Eddie's doctors had told him he needed expensive surgery. So, Eddie staged an accident in the armory so he could sue and get a big settlement that would cover his surgery expenses. And Jack, Dusty and the other wrestlers who were there would testify about what happened. Eddie's eye operation and his other claims reportedly cost Florida taxpayers between $100,000 and $200,000. It was just another example of how wrestling's *con* mentality permeated wrestlers' everyday *worked* world. And insurance fraud was one of their specialties.

In June 1970, Graham promoted a big show at the Gatorbowl. I flew in to Jacksonville from Tampa with Jack Brisco, Eddie Graham and Graham's son Mike on Eddie's little four-seater airplane. The Gatorbowl show had a double main event. In one, Jack and Dory Funk wrestled for the NWA's world heavyweight championship; Jack lost, as requested, having already been assured his time would come *soon.* In the other main event, Thunderbolt Patterson, Tarzan Tyler and The Great Malenko wrestled Eddie Graham, Don Curtis and me in a six man tag match. It was the first time I wrestled Thunderbolt Patterson, and he was smooth and light; he didn't take any *bumps*, but he had a good looking punch that was light as a feather. His flailing fists never touched me.

My last match in Florida that year was a main event *blowoff match* with Dale Lewis for the Florida State Championship. The show was held in a circus tent permanently staked in downtown Orlando by aging Milo

Steinborn, the local promoter and father of Dickie Steinborn. I had made a lot of trips with Dale that spring and our feud was programmed to end this night. Dale was about six feet two, weighed about 235 and was another one of the few legitimate athletes I met in pro wrestling, having been a college wrestler. Dale *worked* as either *heel* or *babyface,* and he was a pleasant and interesting guy to travel with. He was one of the few other family guys I met in wrestling, and I respected that. That night was my first major title match, and I listened to my instructions carefully. It was to be a two-out-of-three falls format, and Graham told me to take the first fall in 20 minutes. Then he turned to Dale. "You *go over* for the second fall in ten minutes," Graham said. Then, looking at me, Graham said, "Jim, we want you to miss your football tackle, take a *bump* from the ring and Dale will pin you *in the middle* in fifteen minutes." The match was a sellout, and I lost after missing him with my football tackle and winding up in the first row of seats. Why did I do a *job* for Dale Lewis? I had to leave the next day for the Rams' summer training camp.

I should have stayed on the wrestling tour. In the season's first exhibition game against Dallas, I reinjured my knee. But America's Team didn't hurt me seriously until after the game at their victory party in downtown Los Angeles at the Sportspage bar and restaurant. It was one of those evenings that you want to forget about, but can't. After the game, I'd gone out for a few beers with my old Georgia friend and teammate Frank Richter and Gary "Griff" Griffith who owned a watering hole in Wrightwood that was popular with Hollywood celebrities and Ram players. With all the shots and pills I had taken when they put a cast on, it didn't take many beers to drown my sorrow. Somehow, Frank and I ended up at the Cowboys' party across town where we had some friends as well as enemies. Frank wanted to see D. D. Lewis whom he'd known from playing at Georgia, and I was over in the corner talking with Ralph Neeley, a former teammate from the college All-Star team. The room was crowded and noisy, and the Cowboys were walking around with a bottle of champagne in each hand. Someone must have said something that rubbed somebody the wrong way because

suddenly the conversation that Frank was having with a Dallas player turned very sour. Frank got sucker punched and I was pushed off my crutches to the ground. When I landed on the ground, a couple of Cowboys started kicking my leg and stomping on it until the plaster cracked and the cast fell off. Frank and I limped out of there and drove directly to the Rams' training room at Fullerton Junior College. We arrived at daybreak, and Ram trainer George "Mother" Menefee was already inside, starting the coffee. Menefee took one look at us and immediately understood what had happened. He recast my knee and x-rayed Frank's jaw. And never told the coaches. Frank's cracked jaw kept him out of several games and killed his chances to make the team - and more importantly, to become eligable for NFL pension benefits. I wore that cast for another four weeks before surgery but was out for the season on injured reserve. Again. So much for America's Team. The Rams finished the year with a 9-4-1 record, placing second to the 49ers in the Western Division. And although we beat the Giants 31 to 3 in the final game of the season, George Allen left Los Angeles for Washington, D.C. Vince Lombardi died that fall, and Allen became his successor in Washington, D.C. Of course, Allen took the heart of the Rams with him, the over- the-hill gang that became known as the *Ramskins.*

My pro football career ended the next summer in 1971, Tommy Prothro's first year as Rams coach. When I returned to training camp in July, I injured my back during a scrimmage. After traction and other conservative therapy, Ram physicians ordered a spinal fusion - which in those days was automatic disqualification from the NFL forever, a career-ending injury without financial severance pay. It was a humbling end to an NFL career. I had been big, strong, fast and quick - and I had taken good care of myself because I cared so much about a football career. But after seven years, professional football was suddenly gone.

When I was well enough to travel, the Rams sent me home. It was a long and lonely flight. When I returned to Atlanta, I spent the recuperative period playing not with footballs, but with two more additions to the family. Brad and Brett, twin sons, arrived in early 1971. Although Nita always thought four was a nice number, there now were five kids. They were all welcomed, of course, but now I had some serious planning to do. I hadn't thought seriously about my family's financial future until the Rams ordered

back surgery. We had lived well during our seven years in the NFL - cars, trips, condos, expensive clothes for the kids and whatever else we thought we needed. Now, football was gone and I didn't know whether I could wrestle again or if I could, how long I would last. My family faced an uncertain future, but I was confident I would find another career outside pro football and wrestling. Considering my options, I was drawn to real estate in my adopted home state of Georgia where I was well known in a growing economic climate with good business opportunities. And so while I recovered from back surgery, I played with my babies and studied for the real estate examination.

After about nine months in real estate, I felt strong enough to resume wrestling. The doctors had told me not to do anything for a year, but I still dreamed of returning to wrestling to cash in on Ray Gunkel's promise; if my repaired spine could take it, I wanted pro wrestling to replace football. I called Jack Brisco to update him on my situation and ask his advice about *where* I should resume my wrestling career. Although I knew Ray Gunkel would plug me back onto the Georgia circuit, I realized I wasn't well known outside Georgia where I had established myself both in the ring and out. Ray Gunkel had kept my local wrestling identity alive even during football seasons by using me on TV and having me attend the matches so I could be introduced to the crowd when the Rams came to Atlanta to play the Falcons and booking me for personal appearances at boat and home shows when I was available. But other than my Florida tours and some matches in Alabama, I hadn't worked anywhere else outside the south because I wanted to be around my family. But to be successful in wrestling, I needed to be known in other regions of the country. When I discussed all this with Jack, he said it might be wise for me to *work* in some other wrestling territories, and suggested I call his brother Jerry Brisco who was working with Big Jim Crockett who *owned* the lucrative three- state Carolinas territory (North and South Carolina and Virginia). Along with Rip Hawk, Jerry Brisco was then *booking* for Crockett and Jerry was recruiting young wrestlers for Crockett's territory - Mike Graham (Mike Gossett), Austin Idol (Dennis McCord), Tony Garea and others. So I telephoned Jerry, whom I had met when I stayed with Jack in Tampa, and Jerry put me in contact with Big Jim Crockett. Crockett had expressed interest in using me a few years earlier and when I told him about my football injury, he invited me to wrestle for him in the Carolinas.

When I got to Charlotte, Crockett suggested a new *gimmick* for me. “Jim, why don’t we use your football injury in a *program* and bill you as The Avenger - you’re out to avenge your football injury that ended your football career. And to make it interesting, let’s put the *sock* on you. We’ll work a *program* with Ole Anderson,” Crockett proposed.

Since my back surgery would be apparent to the wrestling fans (who could see the bright red scar running up the middle of my back), Crockett thought my football injury should be used as an *angle.* And to help make the injury *angle tell a story*, Carolinas wrestling fans were told my injury was caused by some *heel* wrestlers who had beat me up to end my football career. In wrestling, almost anything real or imagined is used as an *angle,* a *gimmick.* And as wrestling *angles* go, this one was comparatively tame in its deceit.

I was *programmed* to feud with Ole Anderson, born Allen Rogowski, who was a top *heel* in those days. Ole teamed with his *brother* Gene Anderson. Neither the Andersons nor the other *heels* wore a *sock,* so I was to be the masked *babyface.* I called Karl and Hildegaard’s supply shop in Ohio and ordered a black and white nylon mask. Crockett’s territory ran three shows a night six nights a week, and that promotion was then probably the country’s richest outside McMahon’s northeastern territory. Leaving Nita and the kids at home in north Atlanta, I was invited by Jerry Brisco to move in with him to save money on expenses. And I needed to save every dollar to send back to Atlanta for Nita and the kids. The Brisco brothers knew I had a wife and five kids to support at home, and they were willing to help. So I wrestled as The Masked Avenger for six or seven weeks until, unexpectedly, I was booked for a wrestling tour of Japan through Jack Brisco and Eddie Graham. I was anxious to travel internationally, but my dual career in pro football and pro wrestling had precluded the trips abroad until now. But with my pro football career now over, I would see the world.

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I wasn’t surprised to learn that despite Japan’s historic relationship with sumo wrestling (often *worked,* I was told), the Americans’ style of pro wrestling is practiced there with essentially the same scripts, plots,

programs, angj.es and characters that are used in the States. There are two differences: when American wrestlers performed in Japan, they usually wrestled as *heels* and the Japanese wrestlers were *babyfaces* - except when they wrestled in the States as *heels.* So, for the first time in my wrestling career, I *heeled.* And I had to psyche myself up for the completely different role requirement of getting spectators angry - I'd go into the ring and start hollering at two people in the ringside seats; I'd point at them, yelling and snarling. Although I was about twice as big as most of them, they screamed back at me. Then, in pantomime, I acted as if I was going to leave the ring and go after these two fans in the crowd. And that got the rest of the audience going. Once I got some *heat,* it relaxed me and I moved into the rest of the *heel* act - the thumb in the throat, kicking, scratching, punching and biting. I had some fun with the role as I got good at performing *heel* moves.

The second difference between wrestling in Japan and the States is the style of *working;* Japanese wrestlers *work tight,* or *stiff* - they use more pressure and force than their American counterparts who don't like to wrestle that way. One interesting consequence of the clash of styles was that American wrestlers continually complained the Japanese *worked* too snug while the Japanese criticized the Americans for not knowing how to wrestle. Many Japanese wrestlers spoke little or no English, and about all the American wrestlers ever said to them was, *"Loosen up, cocksucker."* As a result, the Japanese wrestlers' English was essentially confined to variations of this magic phrase that they heard over and over. In the course of a pleasant but fractured conversation, Japanese wrestlers said things like, *"You American cocksucker, you"*

I was eager to learn the *heel* repertoire because I had seen other wrestlers who could *work* either way become more valuable performers. Being an American *heel* in Japan also meant that I lost virtually every match. One of the Japanese wrestlers I lost to was the Japanese United National Champion Seiji Sakaguchi, who lost many matches to me during my first year in wrestling in Georgia; I now returned the favor. Sakaguchi was a six foot five, 260 pound silver medalist in the 1967 world judo championships. After being trained by the Funk family in Amarillo, he turned pro the same year I did. Years later, Sakaguchi became *booker* for Antonio Inoki's New Japan promotion. Unfortunately, Sakaguchi's

finishing hold was the backbreaker and before our match, we had one of those fractured dressing room conversations in which I tried to tell him why I didn't want him to use his backbreaker finish; in light of my recent back surgery, I wasn't interested in having my spine stretched across Sakaguchi's thick thighs. I didn't want him to use it, but my message was lost because he used it at the end of our championship match. When my back survived without difficulty, I figured I could still be playing football with the Rams.

The Japan tour lasted six weeks at $700 American dollars (not yen) a week with all expenses paid except food. The wrestling *payoffs* in Japan were good, and two other Americans on the tour, Chris Markoff and Apache Bull Ramos, were making $2,000 a week for their main event matches. By 1972 standards, that was very good money, but it was not enough for them to actually get along with each other outside the ring. Markofff and Ramos were *working* a *program* by trading wins every other night and their scripted feud was scheduled to end in a final *blowoff match* at the end of the tour. But unlike any wrestling feud I ever saw, this one was *real.* Markoff and Ramos actually hated each other, a strong mutual dislike based on a disagreement about money or glory or a woman; or, more likely, Markoff's racism. One night their mutual hatred erupted at a restaurant where wrestlers gathered after a show in a small village in the mountains. They squared off, punching, biting, scratching, throwing chairs, tables and beer bottles and they broke every plate glass window in the restaurant. Ramos bit off a piece of Markoff's ear and Chris chewed through the tip of Bull's finger. The rest of the troupe worried the tour would be canceled but after Ramos and Markoff sobered up and healed their wounds, their *program* continued. In wrestling, too, the show must always go on.

But my most memorable experience during the Japan tour was the night I met a fellow American wrestler in the Tokyo dressing room. The Sheik (Eddie Farhat), the aging wrestler and Detroit's NWA promoter, was this tour's star attraction. I didn't see The Sheik at either the airport or the hotel and so I was introduced to him in the dressing room before the matches. "Hey man, I can use a guy like you in my territory," The Sheik growled. "Anytime you wanna come up, just let me know." His forehead was worse than any I'd seen. Everybody in wrestling knew about The Sheik, one of wrestling's legendary characters, and his ultraviolent reputation preceded him wherever he perpetrated *heel* mayhem. There was

a locker room story that The Sheik had been shot three times in the stomach by an angry fan after a 1967 match in Lubbock, Texas and when he got to the hospital he heard the surgeon say, “Well, they finally shot that Arab!” Even in Japan, he did his Foreign Menace wrestling act, once described by an American anthropologist as *“the ultimate green slime of the human spirit.”*

The Sheik began his wrestling career in 1953 when his friends knew him as Edward George Farhat, a Lebanese immigrant who came to the U.S. with his family when he was 11. He claimed to have played football at Michigan State (which isn’t true) and got into wrestling through Detroit wrestling promoter Bert Ruby. What impressed Ruby wasn’t Farhat’s athletic ability, but his *look* - a satanic scowl hanging down from the darkest, most piercing eyes he’d ever seen. “He thought I was pretty,” The Sheik said - “I got a look that’ll kill you.” Farhat began wrestling in Michigan as The Sheik of Araby and his *gimmick* included wearing an Arabian burnoose, pointed wrestling boots and carrying a Muslim prayer rug into the ring. Sometimes, he brought a snake to the ring and a manager named Eddie Creachman, a short, red haired, cigar-chomping Jewish guy with Coke bottle glasses who got *heat* just by strutting into the ring. The Sheik’s act was something to behold: he jerked around the ring, sneaking crazed stares into the crowd and leering at ringside spectators. He got tremendous *heat* well before his matches even started.

But the most famous part of his nightly performance was its *heel* violence with fire and blood. In many matches, The Sheik mysteriously produced a sudden burst of flame from nowhere, the result of igniting a piece of magician’s flash paper. Before his matches ended however, and they usually ended quickly, there would be a gory bloodbath. The blood seemed to come from wounds produced by The Sheik’s use of illicit objects - pens, pencils and sticks with which he repeatedly stabbed his opponents’ heads. The Sheik’s unspeakable evil enraged the audience, but the real fury was yet to come: when his badly injured opponent miraculously recovered the illicit object and turned its sharp edge on The Sheik, Farhat *gigged* himself again and again. The sight of Arabian blood electrified the crowd. And when The Sheik ultimately won the match, the crowd exploded hysterically ready to riot. The essential basis of The Sheik’s wrestling success was the predictable profusion of his own blood, which is why other

wrestlers called him *Zip* out of his presence. Outside the ring, Farhat carried small boxes of tissue which he used to constantly blot last night's razor cuts. Although some promoters disapproved of The Sheik's act as bad taste, his box office results spoke clearly: he so antagonized wrestling fans, they had spent millions of dollars for many years to see him lose and, hopefully, destroyed.

On this night, he sat quietly in the Tokyo dressing room over in the corner with his pointed boots and a snake curled up in a box on the floor. On a nearby table was an opened suitcase filled with the tools of his trade: tape, razor blades, Kleenex tissue and tubes of Mycitracin. Seated at the table was his wife Joyce who slowly counted aloud: *"Twenty-seven, Twenty-eight, Twenty-nine, Thirty . . "* In the background, local wrestling officials chattered excitedly in Japanese. When Joyce got to *"Fifty!,'* she stopped and turned toward The Sheik, handing him a wad of American $100 bills. I later learned this was The Sheik's deal with promoters: *$5,000 a match paid in American cash delivered before each match.* The rest of us were paid at the end of the week, each Friday. But The Sheik got his money upfront every night, *before* his match. I was impressed. And his matches didn't last longer than five minutes. Once he got *heat,* he pulled out the *spike* and the blood flowed and he'd leer at the crowd and entire sections of the arena would explode in rage! He had them. His *gimmick* was *over!*. Even for experienced wrestlers, it was instructive to watch him perform. And he'd been *on top* for years and years.

It was that Japan tour in 1972 which brought into focus my own future beyond pro football - I *was* going to enjoy this new career in wrestling, and I might not miss football after all.

Chapter 4

P O W E R O F T H E P E N C I L

THE MOST FEARED person in all of pro wrestling is not the champion or the resident *shooter* or *hooker,* nor even the promoter-owner. More than anybody else, wrestlers worry about the *booker,* the person who not only decides who will wrestle whom, but who will win and how and when. The *bookers* discretion to *push* or not *push* reflects the power of management over the careers of individual wrestlers, and young wrestlers who have not yet been *pushed* literally knock each other over for the favorable eye of the *booker.* That *booker* decision to *push* translates into dollars for wrestlers whose income is determined, in theory, by how well they draw and their place on the card. The *booker* is variously revered and feared by the wrestlers because of the authority that is attached to the *booker* role. Inside The Business, wrestlers talk quietly about the *Power of The Pencil.*

Because pro wrestling is not based primarily on wrestling ability or skill, virtually all wrestlers are at least occasionally required to suspend ego and dignity by agreeing to be defeated. But among wrestlers who are *over,* losing - *doing a job* - is a delicate matter because it may affect a wrestler's marketability and hence, an entire career. Wrestlers prefer to win simply because losing diminishes their crowd appeal; like other audiences, wrestling crowds do not approve of losing, do not like losers and do not want to pay to watch losers. What wrestlers fear most, however, is the *booker*'s decision to *kill* them. Over many years, the wrestling industry developed a sure-fire technique of ruining a wrestler's popularity: having him lose, especially repeated losing. As a result of *bookers'* power to manipulate careers, wrestlers often resist instructions to *do a job* by arguing or outright defiance. With the spread of cable TV in the last 20 years, wrestlers have become even more sensitive to scripts that require them to lose on TV.

Sensitive to the career ramifications of losing (*doing jobs*), wrestlers distinguish between losing *good* and losing *bad.* Inside The Business, *wrestlespeak* denotes the difference: a *screw-job* (an undeserved defeat

because of outside interference, referee incompetence or an illegal maneuver) as opposed to *clean-in-the-middle* (a submission or getting pinned in the middle of the ring - one, two, three). Wrestlers believe *screw-jobs* are less consequential for audience appeal than losing *clean- in-the-middle,* especially losing *clean-in-the-middle* to a new or young wrestler who is not getting a *push* - that is, losing to nobody. When told to lose to a *nobody,* an established wrestler will understand that a decision has been made to get rid of him, either because he is *burned out* or regarded to be a troublemaker. But wrestlers' disinclination to *do jobs* explains why so many pro wrestling matches end in *DQs* (disqualifications) or *DDQs* (double disqualifications) or count-outs, all of them match endings that annoy many wrestling fans. Ironically, wrestling fans prefer unambiguous outcomes in which one wrestler clearly defeats another - precisely the scenario that virtually all wrestlers want to avoid. Thus, the disqualification *finish* is a theatrical compromise.

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Nearly every wrestling fan today knows the circumstances under which Bret Hart lost his WWF world championship title to Shawn Michaels in 1997. For one reason or another, the WWF's owner and chief *booker* Vince McMahon asked Bret to drop his WWF world championship *strap* to another one of the promotion's top guys, the younger Shawn Michaels at a Montreal show. McMahon promised Hart he could win it back a month later, but Bret, a Canadian, told McMahon he wouldn't lose the title in Canada where he had a huge following. After some haggling, Bret proposed a *DQ finish* compromise for the Montreal show and would *drop the strap* later in the States. McMahon seemed to agree but about a week before the Montreal match, McMahon learned that Bret was secretly planning to leave the WWF, having negotiated another deal with Ted Turner's WCW. Now knowing of Bret 's future plans, McMahon worried that Bret might leave his WWF with its championship belt, giving Turner's WCW the chance to embarrass McMahon by publicizing the defection of McMahon's champion.

To avoid that possible embarrassment, McMahon changed the script for Bret's title switch, asking him to drop the strap to Michaels one night

before the Montreal show in Detroit. But Bret rejected the change in plans, arguing his appearance in Montreal as champion had already been advertised; instead, Bret again offered to lose to Michaels anywhere in the States during the week *after* Montreal. After Bret's refusal to lose in Detroit, McMahon tried to renegotiate the Montreal *finish.* Although Bret had already agreed to a DQ, McMahon was uncomfortable with it, and proposed seven different alternative *finishes.* When Hart rejected all of them, McMahon finally agreed to let Hart do a *DQ finish,* and they shook hands on it.

On the night of the Montreal show, while Bret and Michaels dressed together and discussed their *highspots,* McMahon's assistant *booker* Pat Patterson interrupted their discussion to suggest a *false finish* as one of their *highspots.* Patterson proposed that near the end of the match, there would be a referee *bump* (with Bret's friend referee Earl Hebner falling to the mat) after which Michaels would put Bret in the sharpshooter (Bret's *finishing* move) but with Bret reversing the hold; at this point, referee Hebner would still be "knocked out" and not see Michaels submit to Bret's sharpshooter; after Michaels submitted (seen by everybody except referee Hebner), Bret would release the hold to revive Hebner; while Bret tried to revive referee Hebner, Michaels would hit him as he turned around and, at this point, a second referee (Mike Chioda) would run to the ring and begin the pin count; a few paces behind the second referee, Bret's brother Owen and brothers-in- law Davey Boy Smith and Jim Neidhart would run to the ring to *save* Bret; Chioda would count 1-2 and Owen would drag Chioda out of the ring; then, original referee Hebner would recover and count 1-2 but Bret would kick out and both wrestlers would exchange near-falls for five more minutes before ending in a *DQ finish.* Wrestling scripts are not as simple as they may look!

Bret accepted Patterson's script changes and a little later, made his way to the ring through a thunderous Canadian *pop* without a hint of impending double-cross. After ring introductions, the match was underway and proceeded according to plan until Bret climbed a ringpost to do a sledgehammer move on Michaels. As scripted, Michaels grabbed referee Hebner, pulling him into Bret's path, and when Bret and Hebner collided, Hebner fell to the canvas, as planned. Then, Michaels shot a quick glance at McMahon, who on this night was stationed unexpectedly at ringside next to

the timekeeper. As planned, Michaels grabbed Bret's legs, putting him in the sharpshooter. At this point, action in the ring departed from the agreed upon script. When Bret relaxed his body, laying in Michaels' sharpshooter a little longer to generate more suspense for the *falsefinish-near fall*, Michaels cinched down hard on the hold, glanced quickly at Hebner who nodded at the timekeeper and screamed, "Ring the bell!" At about the same moment, McMahon elbowed the timekeeper with a sharp thud and screamed, *"Ring the fucking bell!!"* It took a few seconds for Bret to realize he'd been conned and screwed in the most memorable double-cross in recent wrestling history staged in his native Canada and broadcast by pay-per-view throughout North America. As Michaels' ring music immediately played, referee Hebner raced from the ring through the dressing room and jumped into a waiting car with the motor running and his luggage already inside. Still in the ring, Bret jumped to his feet, cursing in McMahon's direction. In the background din, viewers could hear Vince screaming at Michaels, *"Pick the fucking belt up and get the fuck out of there!"*

When Bret finally returned to the dressing room, he confronted Michaels who pleaded he had nothing to do with the changed *finish*, that he didn't want to win the belt this way and was disgusted by it. Minutes later, McMahon approached Bret's dressing room to apologize, saying he had to change the *finish* and get the belt off Hart because he couldn't take the chance of Hart going to WCW without giving the belt back, that he couldn't risk WCW announcing the WWF world champion Hart was coming to WCW. A dressing room scuffle ensued that ended when Hart threw a one-punch KO to McMahon's jaw. In the days afterward, insider accounts of the double-cross spread across the internet and wrestling fan newsletters. The following week, McMahon told his TV audience, "Some would say I screwed Bret Hart . . . [but] I believe Bret Hart screwed Bret Hart . . . there is *a time-honored tradition* in this business that if someone is leaving, they show the proper respect for the organization and its superstars . . . Bret didn't want to honor that tradition." Of course, the *time-honored tradition in this business* is wrestling's euphemism for losing when requested to do so - *doing the right thing.*

There have been many occasions in pro wrestling when the action inside the locker room is hotter than what happens in the ring. Although wrestlers often object to instructions to lose, *refusing to lose is the most dangerous maneuver in all of pro wrestling.* That, and complaining about the pay. You don't stay if they don't want you. Wrestlers fear that little book into which *bookers* write scripts for weeks in advance and, legend has it, the book is always written in pencil so it can be easily changed. *Power of the pencil* means they can pencil you in, or turn the pencil upside down and erase you, and *bookers* can *kill* you with the erasure, rubbing out careers.

I'll never forget an incident one night in Atlanta in the late 1960s. Johnny Walker and I walked back to the dressing room after defeating the Rising Suns, two Japanese guys, in a tag match. Some other wrestlers were standing around talking - Tarzan Tyler, Bob Armstrong and Louie Tillet. As I sat down to unlace my boots, I heard a loud argument over in the corner. When I turned around, Tim Woods, then working under the *sock* as Mr. Wrestling, was screaming at Leo Garibaldi, the booker. *"I'm not going to! And nobody's going to make me!"* Leo was trying to calm Tim down and get the main event started. "Look Tim, it's good for business and you'll do what you're told because you're a trouper," Leo pleaded. When Tim said no again, Leo left the locker room for the front of the arena to talk with his boss, Ray Gunkel. When he returned a fewminutes later, he tried to speak again with Tim. *"I'm not going to do it! This is my livelihood!"* Tim screamed.

It was a surprising scene because Tim Woods was a quiet guy, not given to outrage. The dispute was also curious because Tim had been the leading attraction in the Georgia territory for several years and he'd made lots of money for Ray. What happened that night was this: Tim had been told to take the *sock* off as part of an *angle,* which was Ray's idea. But this unmasking was a little unusual. First, Tim's mask and his identity as Mr. Wrestling had gotten him *over* big. Second, the large crowds Tim had drawn had caused him to start asking about his money. He was making good money, but Ray was keeping most of it and Tim thought he deserved a larger share. The command to unmask was Ray's way to remind Tim of who was in charge and I guess it worked because Tim didn't wrestle that night; his match was canceled and the crowd was told he'd been injured in

another match the night before. A few nights later, Dickie Steinborn put on Tim's old *sock* and did the unmasking in Savannah. Dickie Steinborn, son of famous circus wrestler Milo Steinborn in the 1930s and then one of Eddie Graham's local promoters in Florida, was good looking, very nice guy but never *got over;* of course, he never got the *push,* either. He'd been married and divorced and toured the wrestling circuits with a camper filled with women; Dickie stayed with wrestling because he loved the lifestyle.

But Tim didn't wrestle again that week. In fact, he didn't wrestle the following week or the week after or the next month. He'd been fired and he was gone. That incident caused me to reflect about the wrestling industry's relationships with wrestlers - no contracts concerning pay or mutual expectations and no standard wage scale. No medical insurance, no sick leave, no pensions, no vacations. No nothing. Coming from pro football, the wrestling world was beginning to show itself as a secretly abusive system of exploitation about which no one in the larger community knew or cared.

Despite my growing reservations about the wrestling life, I continued to be a model *babyface* for several years. My *payoffs* were good as promised; counting the cash bonuses, more than what was promised which was remarkable for a business that did not then formalize agreements with contracts. And I was used well in my matches and *programs*, almost always winning and when I didn't, losing *good* - getting beat in a way that didn't hurt my appeal. And I took my wrestling performances seriously by trying to put on good shows, *selling* for anyone and taking *bumps* and cooperating with promoters by providing TV commentary and newspaper interviews. Sometime later, I realized my early acceptance of The Business was caused by two factors. First, like other young guys, I was vulnerable to the superficial appeal of various forms of personal irresponsibility associated with the bright lights, money and partying. Secondly, unlike most other wrestlers, my *real* identity was tied to respectable athletic achievement, pro football. In one sense, wrestling was an avocational lark, something I did not examine critically until I was suddenly cut loose from pro football. That was a personal turning point.

During my first few years in wrestling, I was so busy living this lark to the fullest and too flattered by the special treatment I got to take critical notice of certain aspects of The Business that had been there all along. For one thing, the wrestling game was a much lower form of sports entertainment than I had participated in; lots of wrestlers were fat and out of condition and many were older men who would not have been around if wrestling demanded athletic skill. Some wrestlers didn't take their performances seriously, not even trying to put on a good show by performing moves and *selling* for other wrestlers. It was also true that much wrestling *was* incompetent pantomime because promoters depend upon the continual introduction of novices to fill the role of poorly paid *jobbers*, especially TV *jobbers*. I ultimately concluded the quality of wrestling - *working* - was affected by wrestler treatment, which was why many didn't perform as well as they could.

It took awhile to see it, but I eventually realized that most pro wrestlers suffered from the kind of alienation that only human puppets understand: performers instructed where and when to wrestle, to lose, to cut their foreheads and what to say on *the stick.* And it didn't stop there. They also were expected to accept with graciousness and without argument whatever pay the promoter deemed appropriate, and they were expected to leave when requested to do so. Again, without comment. In other words, wrestlers were *employees* by any definition, not *independent contractors* as promoters always claimed. Coming from pro football's players' association, I found this labor relationship between wrestlers and their employers bizarre. So did Rock Hunter, a 20 year veteran who said: *"What you have in wrestling is a handful of demigods taking in millions and giving nothing back. They have gone beyond capitalism to feudalism and damn it, it's just not right."*

Still, an awful lot of guys signed onto this form of abuse, and I started to wonder *why?* After thinking about it, I concluded part of the answer has to do with the fairly narrow range of occupational alternatives available to most guys who become pro wrestlers. I'm afraid that for many wrestlers, their denigration and mistreatment is still a better life than forty-hours a week at some factory's semi-skilled job for which most of them are employable in the real world. For young, well built unskilled guys without much discipline who don't like to get up too early, a pro wrestling career is

an answer to prayer. And once they enter The Business, many wrestlers so completely buy into the fringe benefits of wrestling stardom they become blind to their servitude. In general, wrestlers do not look very far down the road ahead, living for today and especially tonight, and that is the wrestling promoters' trump card.

And I saw it for myself: wrestlers' romantic tales about far off places were true - in some respects, an ideal lifestyle. You didn't have to sit behind a desk and you had a lot of free time to pursue whatever interested you. I loved the travel, especially a chance to explore the south's many historic Civil War battle locations; I'd been a student of Civil War history since my father took me to Gettysburg for a weekend on my 12th birthday and my grandfather gave me ten volumes of Mathew Brady's reproductions. Plus, there were new friends to make and restaurants to try in every town; and in Tim Woods' case, more money than I was making playing pro football. But I learned later the travel got tiring, the partying meaningless and wrestlers' big money days were short. I also learned that wrestler mistreatment was The Business' *best* kept secret. At the core of wrestling life was the *bookers'* arbitrary power to select winners and losers - their unchallengeable authority to decide which wrestlers to *push* and which to use as *jobbers.*

Wrestling's *power of the pencil* was revealed formally in 1985 when former NWA promoter Roy Shire testified in legal proceedings. Roy had wrestled professionally for eleven years before promoting in northern California for 22 years. His promotional territory included Sacramento, San Francisco, Fresno, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Honolulu, Anchorage, Samoa and the Fiji Islands. Roy became another multimillionaire wrestling promoter before he was forced out of The Business and near the end of his career, he made some frank admissions: "There were damned few of us in The Business that told it the way it was. You see, *in wrestling I would say 95% of the guys are con artists,"* Shire testified. When Shire was asked if wrestling scripts were ever designed to reduce the popularity of a wrestler, he replied, "If you want to hurt a wrestler, you pin him right *in the middle*

of the ring: one, two, three. And if enough guys do that, he is done." When Shire was asked about wrestlers who refused to lose, he said, "Oh, if he was told to lose a match and refused, then you wouldn't want him anymore . . . Get rid of them so fast it would make your head swim," and he mentioned his fistfight with Great Mephisto and other problems in firing Red Bastien - "he refused to lose so I gave him his notice." Under oath, Shire admitted: "Anytime there has ever been a guy we called a *rebel* in The Business, I always have been emphatic about saying to whoever I talk to: 'Hey, if that son of a bitch ever did it to me, I wouldn't use him.' When you get a rebel in, he draws nothing but trouble, not only for me but for somebody else."

Roy Shire also came clean about the economics of pro wrestling when he testified: "There isn't a guy [promoter] in the United States with a wrestling territory who isn't a millionaire." When asked about the money wrestlers made [in the 1960s and 1970s], Shire admitted, "they don't make the money people think they do. I used to tell people they took down $200,000 to $250,000, but I was lying. The few that do, you can count on one hand. Most of the preliminary guys are in a $20,000 to $30,000 bracket. The top main eventers get to $50,000 if they keep busy, and a few make $100,000." Roy's own *payoff* practices got him into trouble in 1962 when one of his wrestlers, Chico Garcia, complained to the California Athletic Commission; when the Commission investigated, its findings made headlines: MATMEN'S PAY AS PHONY AS SHOW, screamed the *San Francisco Examiner.* When the Athletic Commission learned that Roy had paid one wrestler as little as $5 for a show in Modesto, it established a $25 minimum pay for each wrestler. The *Examiner* concluded "it's hard to get worked up over the wages of the wrestling phonies . . . [but] the masters of these slaves are getting away with an abnormal amount of loot."

Another member of pro wrestling's establishment was forced to testify about wrestling's *power of the pencilin* 1983. Promoter Jim Barnett, then president and chairman of Georgia Championship Wrestling who also *booked* appearances of the NWA's world champions for many years, was asked to explain how wrestling's world champions were selected. Under oath, Barnett said, "Well, every promoter has an aspirant and they might at a meeting say that Mr. X has a very good collegiate wrestling or football background or is very reliable or attractive on television or in the area, is a very good wrestler. And you mull over those people; of course, the most

important thing or the two most important things in my opinion is box office charisma and reliability . . . it's a yearly meeting, social meeting, really, of the [National Wrestling] Alliance and someone might say, ' Ric Flair should be champion and he should go wrestle the world's heavyweight champion.' And that's how he's picked. It's also been done in the [NWA's] directors' meeting," Barnett testified.

When asked to explain wrestler compensation, Barnett revealed an important wrestling secret: *the wrestling industry's longstanding practice of paying talent 15% of the gross gate* but telling wrestlers they are getting 30%. Barnett said, "I have a formula of taking off the state tax and paying 30% of the gross after the state sales tax is taken off . . . unless it was the [NWA world] champion, and then he gets a percentage. Or, Andre the Giant gets a percentage. [But] that's the only two." When pressed to divulge the basis of wrestler compensation, Barnett described how the NWA's world champion's compensation was calculated. *"He gets 10% after you take off 20% or 25% for your advertising and television and booking and so forth. That's the rule,"* Barnett said. When asked how that formula was arrived at, Barnett replied, "That figure was arrived at, sir, before I ever was a member of the National Wrestling Alliance. That figure has been in existence for many, many years."

In other words, although wrestlers were *told* their *payoffs* were based on 30% of the gate, the industry's *practice* was to compute the wrestlers' percentage after local taxes and promotional expenses (20% to 30%) were deducted. In real dollars, *wrestlers' payroll amounted to about 15% of the gross*, a compensation formula institutionalized when the National Wrestling Alliance was formed in 1948 and its members agreed to pay their world champion 10% of 80% and not compensate other wrestlers more than the champion. Such a practice amounted to price-fixing, according to the Justice Department (as discussed in a later chapter) and permitted wrestling promoters to reap unconscionable profits - Barnett's own financial records showed that between 1973 and 1979, his Georgia Championship Wrestling promotion's profit margin was about 50% a year.

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Roger Barnes began his wrestling career in Quebec in 1963. When he wrestled in Louisiana about eight years later, he changed his name to Ronnie Garvin and adopted the nickname “Hands of Stone” to accompany his one-punch knockout *gimmick.* But Ronnie’s wrestling career followed a serpentine path between the NWA and various *outlaw* promotions. Like many other wrestlers before and after him, Ronnie was regarded as a troublemaker. After a final fling with Angelo Poffo’s aborted *opposition* promotion in the late 1970s, Ronnie squeezed himself back into NWA promotions. I became acquainted with Ronnie in 1972 in Charlotte when we both wrestled for the Crocketts. He worked either *heel* or *babyface,* and was a super *worker.* He wasn’t that big, but he was muscular. He wasn’t that great on the *stick,* but he was one hell of a performer in the ring.

Ronnie’s career was reborn in 1986 when he was selected to work a series of epic and bloody matches with NWA champion Ric Flair, and in September 1987 the NWA ordered Flair to drop the world *strap* to Ronnie in a Detroit match. The NWA wanted to *push* business in Detroit, where it lost its promotional foothold after The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) was kicked out of the NWA in 1981. But Ronnie’s return to top billing did not come easily and in 1980, seven years before he became the NWA’s world heavyweight champion, Ronnie testified about his experiences in pro wrestling: “I always stand up and speak for what I believe, and it’s something you don’t do in wrestling. If you want to make money and be treated nice, you do not speak back. You say, ‘Yes’ and ‘no.’ I did it for about 17 years,” Ronnie said.

“You don’t speak back on what type of thing? What are you referring to?” he was asked.

“About money. You don’t question your money. If there’s a $30,000 house, they give you $50. *If you question it, you’re fired the next day or on the spot.* It doesn’t make any difference to them. I’ve wrestled and had gates of about 30 and 40 and 50 thousand dollars and got $100, and was probably on the fifth match of the card and, you know, like I say, the choice you have is to take the money or leave. That’s about it . . . *Just do what you’re told without asking questions.* If you’re told to go in the ring and make a clown out of yourself and like, for example, I’ve been in the ring with some guys that I could probably have beaten in 30 seconds, maybe less, if it had been on the level, and I had to go out there and make the man

look like he could fly and he was superman. If your egos are very big, it's hard to take," Ronnie said.

Ronnie continued: "I've *been fired many times. Yes, I used to go out and count heads. It was a habit. I had to because they tell you they pay you on a percentage and you're supposed to believe them.* The man tells you that he pays the wrestlers with thirty percent, and you go out and count how many people was there and figure out what the gate is within maybe just a few hundred dollars and it turns out that there's a few thousand dollars missing. And I'm very good with figures. I'm not good at much of anything else, but figures I'm good at, and figure the gate and what you should be getting and that comes out that you're *only getting 15 percent. He's paying every wrestler with 15 and 18 percent. When somebody promises you 30 percent, and you're going out and working hard for it, that's what you're expecting. I think a man should speak out when it comes to a situation like that because you're being cheated.'*

Ronnie was asked, "When you would find a situation that you felt was that way, you would speak out and then move on to another location?"

"Well, sometimes - I was married; I'm no longer married, but I was and *it's kind of hard to move when you've got kids, and especially when you have a family - they'll* [promoters] - *I found that they take advantage of you a lot more because* [it forces you to be] moving the kids out of school. It's kind of hard to leave, and sometimes I had to take it for the sake of my family. I would take the abuse. I would take the money and I would speak my mind and the next night it would be worse," Ronnie answered.

Ronnie continued: "In the 17 years I've been wrestling, you cannot express your opinion unless you want to be fired. If you do not do what they tell you to do, like if the promoter Jim Barnett, or any one of them comes in and says to me, 'I want you to lose this match,' and if he says, 'No,' well he'll send somebody out there and try to hurt me because he'll have somebody. They all do. And it sort of keeps the wrestlers in line,' Ronnie testified.

Then Ronnie was asked, "What is the NWA? What do those letters stand for?" Ronnie replied: "National Wrestling Alliance - it's a group of promoters that are together and they control the wrestling totally-.financially and with talent and every which way, even with muscle."

After more broken promises, Ronnie Garvin left the NWA in 1988 to work for small, independent promotions. Then, when Vince McMahon's WWF offered him work as a preliminary match performer later in the year, the former world champion took it. Wrestling fans didn't understand why Ron Garvin went from world champion to *underneath* wrestler in about 12 months. By spring 1989, Ronnie was losing his *undercard* matches.

My friend Jack Brisco was told to win the NWA world title in July 1973 when Harley Race got instructions to drop it. That *strap* change had actually been *penciled in* for Houston about two months earlier when Dory Funk was the champion but when Dory was instructed to lose it to Jack, Dory claimed he'd injured his shoulder and needed to be out of action. In the meantime, NWA promoters talked Dory into dropping the belt to Harley Race, who would be an interim champion. For the *strap* switch to Jack, Eddie Graham put up the *escrow deposit* - the traditional up-front cash down-payment for the world title, against which he withheld Jack's *payoffs* so Jack would give the belt back when they were through with him.

I will always remember my association with Jack Brisco for what he taught me about alternative pathways to survival in The Business. Jack spent much of his career wrestling and *booking* for Eddie Graham's NWA Florida office and Jack's cooperation brought him immediate rewards: in early 1969, he was given Florida's version of the Southern heavyweight championship and later in the year, the Florida tag team championship with Cyclone Negro; later, Jack and his brother Jerry worked as tag team champions not only in Eddie Graham's Florida territory but in the Crocketts' Carolinas territory. In late 1970, Jack was given the NWA's Florida Television title, which he held throughout most of 1971 before dropping it to Bob Roop. A few months later, Jack got the Florida Heavyweight Championship in a match with Mr. Saito in Tampa, and he held that belt for almost two years, occasionally dropping it to Missouri Mauler, Tarzan Tyler and Paul Jones.

Jack was anointed early in his career by Eddie Graham for greater fame, and one of Graham's projects was to make Jack *world* champion. Why? Because Graham figured he could make a lot of money with Jack who was another wrestler with legitimate athletic credentials. Although he was a little small to be a heavyweight, he had a good body. But more importantly, Jack understood how the game was played and could be counted on to go along with it. With Eddie Graham as his patron, Jack knew he could benefit from Graham's power in the wrestling industry. It was Graham's influence in the network, aided by Graham's effusive manner, which led Jack down the road he roamed.

Graham not only got Jack booked into Madison Square Garden, he agreed to have Jack's brother Jerry *figured in.* Despite Jerry's small size, it was arranged for Jerry to hold some of the same championship *straps* that were given to Jack earlier. Eddie Graham also arranged for some of Jack's legal scrapes to be forgotten.

One Saturday morning after I came to the Florida circuit, Jack took me to Eddie Graham's Tampa wrestling office at 109 Albany Street. Beyond the offices on the first floor of the building was a gym with a wrestling ring, some seats and a fully equipped TV studio where Graham taped his weekly *Championship Wrestling From Florida* TV shows with Gordon Solie. On other occasions, Graham used his TV cameras to indulge some personal peculiarities by videotaping sexual games with arena dollies. He liked to

show the tapes to certain wrestlers he wanted to impress - “Look at what I’m gonna do with this one,” he’d giggle. But on Saturday mornings, Graham watched wrestling matches in the backroom ring. *Private* wrestling matches. It was then I learned that Eddie Graham invited young men who had asked for tryouts in The Business to get into the ring with either Jack Brisco or Bob Roop. After Graham ordered each of the guys off the street sign a release, they entered the ring for a tryout, one at a time. First, Jack got in with a young guy with a nice body but didn’t know anything about wrestling. After a few minutes, Jack got him in a full nelson and dragged him down to the mat. With the guy’s arms hanging upward, Jack pushed his face into the mat. BLUUP! He mashed the guy’s face further into the canvas, as the blood flowed across the ring. He broke his nose. Then Bob Roop went into the ring with another young guy and got him in a leglock. When Bob reversed the angle, the knee popped. While the guy screamed and cried, someone called an ambulance since he couldn’t walk home with a broken leg. It was the first time in my life I witnessed deliberate, sadistic breakage of human bones - legs, arms, jaws, and noses. As my stomach turned, Eddie Graham experienced near orgasmic excitement as he stood nearby, sweating a little and giggling. It was a weekly ritual that appealed to Graham’s perverse sadism and functioned as bizarre public relations for Championship Wrestling From Florida. When the guys who were beaten up got back on the street, they told their friends, *“Hey, this shit is for real, man!*

When I asked Jack about it, he brushed my question away with a curt, “Jim, you *go with the program* if you want to survive. *Go with the program.”* I would hear that often from Jack, and from all the envelopes with his *payoff* checks strewn around his house, I understood why he came to that viewpoint. Jack’s uncashed *payoff* checks had become an issue because they were screwing up accounting procedures in NWA offices and the accountants were constantly telling Jack to cash his checks. I suspected Jack’s slowness in depositing his *payoffs* meant more than just sloppy banking - I think Jack hated what he was doing and its *quid pro quo.* Over drinks, Jack talked bluntly about his view of pro wrestling: *“To get yourself further in The Business, you’ve got to go along with whatever they want you to do. They’re going to play with you and let you know who runs The Business. They’ll put you on a limb and see what you’re going to do,”* he said. Jack knew all about having to compromise himself. He had been a

great NCAA wrestling champion alright, but he was more than that. He became what the wrestling business regarded as a *good boy.* A *babyface* in all ways. They let him know where his money was coming from and what he had to do for it. And then he was put into compromising situations so promoters could test him. Jack passed his tests. Although I respected his legitimate athletic credentials and valued his friendship, he had been brainwashed - indoctrinated to the point where he was willing to place the almighty dollar above and beyond principles, religion or family or any other loyalties. All his prior affiliations, associations and convictions had been wiped off the slate. All of that had been replaced by what the promoter told him to do.

I'll never forget the night when Jack told me the deal had been made for him to get the world *strap.* He ran it all down for me: Eddie Graham and Jim Barnett had agreed to put up the *escrow,* against which Jack's *payoffs* would be deducted until the entire security deposit belonged to Jack. I asked about this odd practice and Jack said, *"You have to put up a pretty good piece of change so there's no funny stuff going down with the belt. They don't want some guy retiring, saying he's never been beat. That ain't business. That's part of the whole thing - when it's time for a guy to drop the strap - if it's done right - everybody makes money doing it"* And Jack made good money during his two year reign as NWA world champion, although he was tormented by what he was doing. Privately, he thought wrestling was the shits, as did a lot of other guys whose nightly marihuana, beer and painkillers masked the anguish. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, wrestler drug use was confined to these substances, and although some of this was recreational, much of it was intended to reduce the pain, both physical and mental.

The end of Jack's championship reign came in late 1975 when he *dropped the strap* to Terry Funk in Miami Beach. After that, he disappeared for six months, returning later to finish his career with the WWF. At the time, the WWF planned to use Jack and his brother as world tag team champions, defeating Adrian Adonis and Dick Murdoch. But one winter afternoon after a long road grind in the middle of a snowstorm, Jack suddenly quit The Business. He was at Newark airport watching airplanes arrive and depart, and bought a ticket for the next flight to Tampa; he told friends he was tired of the travel and was going home. Jack never wrestled

again, but I guess he got a lot out of it. Today, he oversees some lucrative investments in a Florida orange grove and real estate and owns a successful auto repair shop in Tampa with Jerry, who still works for Vince McMahon. I haven't seen or talked with Jack or Jerry Brisco since January 1976 when we watched the Super Bowl together.

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The other guy who performed the sadistic ritual for Eddie Graham was Bob Roop, who'd been a member of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Greco- Roman wrestling team at Mexico City. Bob was a collegiate wrestler at Southern Illinois University and an AAU National Greco-Roman heavyweight champion from 1966 to 1969 and an All-Army freestyle and Greco-Roman champion. He turned professional in 1969, spending the first four years of his career with the Tampa promotion where he became Graham's *stooge*, as he put it later. I got to know Bob in 1969 when we were partners in several tag matches and made a lot of trips together on the Florida circuit. He was a friendly, sincere guy, well read and intelligent and we hit it off together both in and out of the ring. At about six feet and 250 pounds, he looked chunky and solid, especially in his red, white and blue amateur style singlet which he wore in the ring. Because of his amateur wrestling record, he was *pushed* hard and groomed as a future NWA world champion. Pro wrestling's door to fame and fortune was opened for him and he was presented the golden ladder, but some of his dues involved working as Graham's *hitman*, and Bob came to hate himself for doing it.

In 1981, Bob Roop testified in legal proceedings about his experiences: "I *was considered sort of an enforcer simply just for the basic fact that I can wrestle.* When I started out in Florida, I was informed [that] there was a bunch of people that were very bad for professional wrestling as a whole, that these people are allowed to call themselves professional wrestlers. In most cases, they were people that were either trying to break into wrestling or they were competition. I learned later that these gentlemen were lured into matches with me in public under the impression that they were going to be given a workout, a chance to see what they could do. And they were made to sign a release - 'that under no circumstances, even

should I suffer serious injury or death' - that actually was in a release that these people signed if you can believe it, it says, 'or death' - 'I release all rights' to, you know, all obligations to the Florida Championship Wrestling' or the, you know, the owners or to Bob Roop and all that. And these people had to sign that. *I was told to go out and I was told to stretch them, which is a fairly ambiguous term.. It was to me at the time. It wasn't until about three weeks after I started this, that a gentleman that was a partner in the office there at the time, Lester Welch* [Fuller] *. . . said, 'Go out and break the guy's leg.'*

"In another incident I was wrestling a guy about your size, [pointing to court reporter] but he had bleached-blond hair and he was, you know, he was kind of a pathetic guy. He wasn't in very good shape, but he was - he had worked for some competition there in Florida, just a little local group that didn't have any television and they just worked in one town about every two weeks. And he was a local guy and they had apparently offered him the same enticement to come down and he would get a workout, a tryout, and he was waiting in the ring and Buddy Fuller [Welch] came up to me a said, *'Go in there and break his leg.. And you know, I didn't do it, of course, but they were severely disappointed in me, but I didn't. I was characterized as having no guts"*

For awhile, Bob's wrestling career prospered when Eddie Graham booked him in not only Florida, but the Carolinas, Texas, New York's Madison Square Garden, Germany, England, Scotland, Wales and Iraq as he was *pushed* for the NWA's world championship *strap.* After several years, however, Bob tried to extricate himself from Graham, *"to shake Mr. Graham's patronage"* Bob testified later. "*Even though I didn't want it, I had it* [Graham's patronage and control] *whether I wanted it or not* and any promoter that I would call [for bookings] would ask Eddie Graham if it was all right if they use me, even though I'd expressed interest that, you know, I was independent and wanted to work on my own," Bob said.

Trying to work on his own in 1974, Bob booked himself into the lucrative Dallas territory but wrestled only three months because promoter Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) " *wanted me to challenge the whole Dallas Cowboys football team to prove that wrestling was real.* I thought that was crazy, so I went to Japan, and from there I was given an assignment to go to Australia. Eddie Graham offered me five percent of the promotion in

Australia and so much money per week to go over there. The NWA promotion there was being challenged by some guys that had split off from them and they were challenging them to matches. *I was to go over there to accept the challenges and discourage these people from ever doing it again* . . . The people from Australia that were competing went to New Zealand and *I was then brought back,, again in the role of an enforcer and - I hate to say that I was very naive about it because I was trying to be what a good wrestler is, a showman, rather than a strong-arm man"*

After Australia, Bob was sent to Atlanta *"to take care of the opposition"* there, and when he refused to do additional *stretchings,* he returned to Florida to work as Graham's *booker.* Two years later, Bob went to California to work for promoter Roy Shire. Bob thought he had booked himself into northern California, and was surprised to learn later he had actually been sold to Shire by Eddie Graham who told Shire that Bob would not only wrestle but *book* and produce Shire's TV shows. Bob was a big box office draw at San Francisco's Cow Palace in 1977 when he feuded with *babyface* Kevin Sullivan, but Bob lasted only ten months. In the middle of his run, he was fired - subjected to Roy Shire's eraser and blacklisted for "trying to steal my territory," said Shire. After offering his services to other NWA promoters and receiving no offers, Bob wrestled for various *opposition* promotions in Tennessee and Kentucky.

In these same legal proceedings, Bob was asked: "Would you say that the wrestling business has been good to you?"

"No. [But] you get into something . . . going through an unnecessary school of hard knocks and learning certain things that were not necessary for you to take the knocks to learn through *having been manipulated and lied to and used for somebody else's purposes* rather than for my own good; if after seven or eight years of that, even if it's slightly disgusting, you still have that information. You've been to school . . . there's an opportunity to use that knowledge - it's not just a matter of business, you know, for people are personally involved, too - in a way to make some of those scars that you've acquired on your persona and your psyche and emotionally, in different ways, to use some of those scars to erase them in a sense," Bob answered.

Bob continued: " I have the feeling that wrestling can be run, even if it's on a single promotion basis, *it can be run fairly and honestly and there's*

enough money for everybody and it can be enjoyable . . . and that's why I'm not making anywhere near the money with [an *outlaw* promotion] that I could be making. But I do have a lot more personal satisfaction and less pressure and stress of knowing that I'm not - *I'm no longer suspended and dangling from a rope, you know, that my life is not being controlled by people that have no right to"*

Bob's tenure as *opposition* wrestler did not last long, and after Eddie Graham's suicide in 1985, he returned to the Florida's NWA office to work as its *booker* until he was fired in 1986, shortly before other promoters absorbed Graham's Tampa-based Florida circuit. By 1987, Bob's pro wrestling career was over, and in the years afterward, he tried without success to promote an independent promotion in Florida.

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I'll always remember the night I met Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson at a wrestling show in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1970. T-Bolt had wrestled Missouri Mauler (Larry Hamilton), and broke his foot when the two of them were scuffling outside the ring. Back in the dressing room, a bone in his left foot was poking through the skin but no one seemed especially interested in his condition and obvious pain. A day later, T-bolt found a doctor in Tampa who put a cast on his foot and told him to rent a wheelchair and not wrestle for two months. That was the first time I saw what happened to pro wrestlers after serious injury. First, there was no medical insurance unless a wrestler arranged to be insured on his own, and most didn't do that. Second, the disabled wrestler was cut from the payroll, either immediately or after a week or two.

In T-Bolt's case, Eddie Graham gave him some money for a couple of weeks and then cut him off. T-Bolt borrowed a few bucks from other wrestlers just to eat. This problem of uncompensated injuries was so troublesome that absence of medical coverage was the next biggest wrestlers' gripe after *payoffs* (the third common wrestler complaint was absence of pensions). A few days before T-Bolt's cast came off, Graham's *booker* Lester Fuller [Welch] told T-Bolt to walk without his crutches for a TV interview at the Tampa studio's *Championship Wrestling from Florida*

taping. T-Bolt wanted to get back into action in the worst way, but he was scared to death about coming back too soon; he didn't want to re-injure the foot, and told Fuller to go to hell. T-Bolt's response to Fuller was typical of how T-Bolt dealt with promoters, and it was in a sense responsible for his reputation as a troublemaker. I had already heard that T-Bolt was having problems with Eddie Graham, that he always complained about his money. But I also think other wrestlers resented T-Bolt because he took a *spot* away from someone else, some white guy. T-Bolt was one of wrestling's rare black stars.

When T-Bolt first worked for the wrestling industry's most notorious racist Eddie Graham, he was booked only in small towns because Graham didn't think he could draw well in Tampa or Miami or Jacksonville. After Graham discovered he'd misjudged T-Bolt's appeal, his bookings were changed and in 1970, he was given the NWA's Florida Brass Knuckles title. Now, T-Bolt wrestled Jack Brisco and NWA world champion Dory Funk and Dusty Rhodes (Virgil Riley Runnels, Jr.) and other white wrestling stars on main events in Florida's big cities. About a year later, I wrestled T-Bolt at a big Gatorbowl show in Jacksonville. He was then a *heel,* and was being used *on top* because he'd developed enormous appeal to wrestling fans, both black and white. And T-Bolt's greatest performances were on the *stick* in TV interviews. Although he was barely literate, his ghetto street-talk had a way of coming across to wrestling fans. The promoters just let him go with his TV interviews, sermonettes that combined elements of his religious belief and civil rights principles. *"You gotta get all the way down to get back up!,"* he'd say. And he'd close with a signature line: *"You better tell somebody!!"* Wrestling fans in the south loved him and his jive- interview style was later copied by white wrestler Dusty Rhodes and incorporated into Dusty's "American Dream" son-of-a-plumber *gimmick.* But it was T-Bolt who originally developed it, as everybody in The Business knew. When T-Bolt wrestled Dusty, however, the *gimmick* belonged to Dusty, not the man who created it.

T-Bolt is my age, born in 1941, and grew up on the streets of Des Moines and Waterloo, Iowa. He was kicked out of school in the ninth grade and was married twice by the time he was 21. He entered pro wrestling in 1965 while working at a John Deere plant in Des Moines when another Iowan, wrestler Ox Baker, introduced him to Kansas City promoters Gust

Karras, Bob Geigel and Pat O'Connor. Initially, he wrestled as Claude Peters; then Los Angeles booker Jules Strongbow renamed him *Thunderbolt* Patterson. He was not an immediate hit, but was wrestling main events a year later. And he worked in most of the big wrestling cities - Amarillo, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles Minneapolis, Omaha, San Francisco and Toronto. He also worked in Australia, where his ring name was changed to Sweet Daddy Brown by promoter Jim Barnett who already had his close friend Pat Patterson (Pierre Clemont) wrestling on his shows. But wherever he appeared, T-Bolt was one of the few black wrestlers who drew large crowds; most black wrestlers were used as *jobbers* for white guys.

Despite his success, T-Bolt learned over the years that he was routinely paid less than his white counterparts, and he became continually vigilant about his treatment - unlike Bobo Brazil and Ernie "The Cat" Ladd. So far as I know, T-Bolt never got the under-the-table cash in envelopes given to other wrestling stars, but he knew about it. And when T-Bolt learned he wasn't getting his fair share of the revenue he produced, he asked promoters to see ticket vouchers. Promoters didn't like that, especially coming from someone they regarded as an *uppity nigger.* To appease him, promoters permitted him to win various *regional* titles, like the California tag team championship with Alberto Torres in Los Angeles in 1966 and the Brass Knuckles title in Amarillo in 1967, 1968 and 1970 and the NWA's Texas-based American Tag Team title in Houston with Wahoo McDaniel in 1969 and again in 1971 with Toru Tanaka and in 1972 with Johnny Valentine in Ft. Worth.

But T-Bolt's trouble-making reputation spread in the late 1960s when he wrestled main events for the NWA's Amarillo-based Texas promotion. After realizing he was being treated *worse* than white wrestlers, he demanded more money. When promoters refused to increase his *payoffs* and invited him to take it or leave it, he usually took it and sulked. T-Bolt had other problems, too. Apart from the ordinary racism of other wrestlers, they also resented T-Bolt because he couldn't take *bumps* or fly around the ring. He had a bad hip, arthritis and bad knees, and he couldn't really do anything in the ring except shake his butt. His white opponents not only had to *sell* for him but take *bumps* and do *jobs* for him, and they didn't like that. There was another reason for T-Bolt's continual complaining: he knew he'd never

be seriously considered for wrestling's world championship *strap.* As a black man, he'd never be treated like his white counterparts in terms of *payoffs, push* and upward mobility in The Business. No one will ever understand the extent to which this bothered him - not because his ego needed the world belt, but because he drew thousands of black wrestling fans for whom Thunderbolt Patterson was their black *hrpe.* T-Bolt understood that, and he wanted the *strap* for his people as well as the money it brought. T-Bolt drew big crowds for Fritz von Erich's Dallas promotion as a *babyface.* He worked main events with Johnny Valentine, Ernie Ladd and Wahoo McDaniel. But when he realized he was being used to set up white wrestlers for *blowof* matches with the white champion, he complained. Von Erich decided to turn T-Bolt *heel* in 1971 which created other problems: T-Bolt's TV interviews became sermonettes on the faith of a *black Christian heel!.* The white wrestling fans who attended von Erich's church complained about T-Bolt's Bible-thumping interviews and the black Christian-stomping-on-the-white-guy *heat.* T- Bolt was told to go wrestle in Florida because von Erich's Baptist brothers and sisters didn't want to watch a black *heel* who recited Scripture.

I renewed my acquaintance with T-Bolt when I wrestled in the Carolinas and Virginia in 1973. He was *on top* in Charlotte and other cities, just as he had been in Texas and Florida and other territories he worked. Then, a few months later, T-Bolt was put in tag team matches - primarily because other wrestlers wanted a cut of the gates that T- Bolt was drawing. Ronnie Garvin and Jerry Brisco argued openly about who should be T-Bolt's partner - they both wanted a piece of T-Bolt's main event money. He complained again, arguing for singles matches that would culminate in his getting the regional championship, the NWA's Mid-Atlantic champion's *strap.* Instead, he was given half of the Mid-Atlantic tag team championship which he shared with Jerry Brisco. So, T-Bolt wrestled tag matches, as instructed by bookers Johnny Weaver and Rip Hawk, but his sad eyes told me a lot. One night he blew out his hip in a Charlotte match and he agonized from the bone-against- bone pain. A doctor told him he might not walk again, much less wrestle. But wrestling was T-Bolt's only skill and meal ticket in life, and he started eating enough painkillers to get through each night's match.

While I lived with Jerry Brisco in Charlotte that year, T-Bolt had an apartment in the same building, downstairs. When he'd come over to Jerry's place to cook for other wrestlers, I got to know him better and our relationship moved from acquaintance to friendship. I suppose I took a liking to the guy because of my lifelong attraction to victims of failed human principles. I admired people who were willing to fight and scratch for what was right, and I never met many of them in the wrestling business. Especially struggles with racism, which in those days were ensnared in unbelievable hatred and vengeance. Or so it seemed to a white outsider who was raised by a black nanny whose unconditional love had not prepared me for dealing with racism in the larger world. I just couldn't understand it.

My other recollection of T-Bolt is the sincerity of his religious commitment. I'm no Bible-thumper but T-Bolt was the only wrestler I knew who packed a Bible inside his gym bag with his wrestling gear, razor blades and pills. Before his matches, while other wrestlers were entertaining each other with stories about last night's party, T-Bolt was over in a corner hunched over his Bible. He could barely read, and so I helped him and we read together. Especially, Ephesians 6:12: *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* T-Bolt was the only wrestler I told about my Christian faith, weekly church attendance and daily prayer.

After we became friends, T-Bolt revealed he and other wrestlers had resented me when we met two years earlier. He said, "Jim, you're one of the kinds of people that the wrestling business sucks up to, putting them right *on top* to draw money." T-Bolt said he had resented the promises made to me. While I was being flown around from Georgia to the Carolinas to Florida, he was looking for another territory that would treat him better than the last one. One night in the Charlotte dressing room, T-Bolt told me, "Jim, they got big intentions for you" and then he warned me: "*the wrestling business takes advantage of anybody who has any notoriety or ability.* Jim, you got to understand that *wrestlers are worse than whores. They are pimped. They use you as long as they possibly can or as long as you don* t *complain. When you complain, they get rid of you"* That was the first but not the last time I'd hear a wrestler refer to himself as *whore.*

Initially, I had dismissed T-Bolt's cynicism as sour grapes because the Brisco brothers told me he was a chronic malcontent. But a few years later, I took T-Bolt's complaining more seriously when the Carolinas promoter Big Jim Crockett's obesity finally caught up with him and he died one night in April 1973. T-Bolt attended his funeral because, he said, "Mr. Crockett was the only promoter I ever met who treated me fairly. Mr. Crockett was *behind* me because the fans was *for* me." After Crockett's death, the Carolinas promotion was run for a time by John Ringley, a Crockett son-in-law who managed the family's baseball park in Charlotte. At about this time, Ringley told T-Bolt he was one of the territory's hottest stars, and it was time to make T-Bolt the regional Mid-Atlantic heavyweight champion. But Ringley's new *booker* George Scott vetoed the plan to give T-Bolt the *strap*, telling T-Bolt: "No, we don't want a *black* champion - the *blacks* need to be always *after* the championship." When T-Bolt complained and threatened to quit, Ringley gave him $5,000 to stay but Scott warned him, "*Fine. We'll get another nigger off a garbage truck and make him a star.'*

At this point, T-Bolt's *program* in the Carolinas changed. After that, he was used as a mid-level *gebroney* to put other wrestlers *over* and he sulked. The final straw came at a Crockett TV taping when *booker* George Scott told him to *gloom* Johnny Heidmann, destroying the aging wrestler in the twilight of his career. T-Bolt beat Heidmann as instructed but didn't *gloom* him. After the match, T-Bolt told Scott, "I have more respect for Johnny than that," and he left the territory. By now, T-Bolt was accustomed to the going and coming because he realized he was used by promoters to *blow-up* their territories - invited to wrestle and rekindle fan interest but after bringing the crowds back, sent away to perform his *showboat* magic elsewhere.

T-Bolt was becoming bitter about his treatment, having concluded that both his color and his education conspired against him. He sneered when white Dusty Rhodes incorporated his street- talk interviews and shuck-and-jive *gimmick* for the south's largely black wrestling audiences. That wasn't all: when T-Bolt left the Crocketts in 1972 to work for Ann Gunkel's *outlaw* promotion, a South Carolina newspaper carried a story about him that reported Claude Patterson wrote bad checks and left the state owing the Crockett promotion several thousand dollars; the article didn't mention the hundreds of thousands of dollars he made for the Crockett family. T-Bolt's

life in pro wrestling is another regrettably good example of a genuine casualty - despite his having entertained hundreds of thousands of fans and producing millions of dollars for promoters he worked for. When we finally came together as brothers, it was because we both had been blackballed and totally alienated by promoters' power, racism and greed - literally, erased by the *power of the pencil.*

❖

It's always difficult for wrestling outsiders to sympathize with wrestlers' labor problems. Some say that since pro wrestling is not a *real* contest, wrestlers' complaints don't qualify as *real* problems. Other outsiders often ask why more wrestlers don't complain openly, hire lawyers and file lawsuits. And organize themselves as a labor union to negotiate better treatment. Those are good questions - why *don't* wrestlers do these things? When Eddie Mansfield was asked by *Philadelphia Daily News* reporter Ray Didinger why wrestlers didn't complain openly about their treatment, Mansfield answered: *"Fear, you're afraid of what the promoters will do if you speak up. They'll cut you off. . . that's number one. The other thing is you're embarrassed - I never wanted to tell anyone I made $35 for a show.* I'd strut around like a big shot - The Continental Lover - and I might have just enough [money] to buy a hamburger at Hardees. *No matter how badly a wrestler is being treated, he'll protect The Business. Why ? Because there is some promoter telling him to hang on because he's this close to making it big."*

The real *power* of pro wrestling's *pencil* is its manipulation of wrestler dependency. *Wrestling wages are not only a matter of greedy economics - part of it is control.* Promoters walk the narrow line between paying so little that wrestlers don't show up and paying so much that they lose *control* over them. And control is taken very seriously by The Business. That is why young wrestlers, when they made allusions to settling down and buying a house, were told to *get a house with wheels on it.* As my years in wrestling went by, it became clearer that The Business didn't want wrestlers to become too comfortable; they must be kept on *short grass* - kept a little hungry or else the string, when pulled, does not respond. Wrestling

promoters understood that without establishing a condition of dependency, they had no power. From this standpoint, a certain amount of wrestler disaffection was regarded as desirable, but the wrestlers' fussing among themselves must not escalate to the point of collective grievances, including especially the threat of unionization. The message communicated to wrestlers was this: *since this is all fake, we don't have to pay you real wages. And if you don't like it, we'll get somebody else as easily as we got you.* As a result, most wrestlers kept quiet and patiently waited for the *booker*'s decision to *push* them, inspired by the myth that if they stuck with it, their ship would come in. And it's true today.

One thoughtful observer of pro wrestling's labor practices is Ray Whebbe, a Minneapolis entertainment promoter, and he put it this way: "Employment conditions in wrestling are about the worst I've seen - worse than boxing, worse than rock-and-roll. It's immoral, it's wrong. Wrestlers are told that they're free agents, but they're not free at all. First, they're told who to wrestle, where, what time to show up, what to wear, when to do TV interviews, when to do charity. They can't even visit hospitals without permission - there's no freedom at all. Second, *payoffs* are based on some vague theory that gets changed all the time. The bottom line is you take what you're given. Third, they force wrestlers to stay at a certain level of the card, and they can and do ruin a person's credibility for future work. That's wrong. But you have to do it or you don't get paid. I think *if wrestlers pushed their cases legally, the wrestling business would be in a world of trouble.* But they don't even know what they're making - if they did, they'd quit. Half of them are so doped up, they don't know the difference. The other half think it's real. They believe their own bullshit. They think it's worth something to be a wrestler. They think it's cool. After awhile, *being a wrestler is cooler than being paid. They want to be stars, and the promoters take advantage of that - take advantage of their stupidity, take advantage of their house payments, take advantage of their drug use.* The whole point becomes kind of senseless unless you're addicted to being a wrestler. Being a *star!* And it's easy. A lot of these guys are athletes who failed everywhere else."

My old friend Zulu (Ron Pope), former bodybuilder and wrestler, absolutely nailed the problem this way: "It's such a crooked business. The guys [wrestlers] are a bunch of crooks. They steal from the *marks* and the

promoters steal from them. The guys [wrestlers] want to be stars. They'll do anything - they'll cut throats for it.

Actually, wrestlers don't have to be paid. All they need is a couple of six packs of beer a night and a nice looking ring rat with a good body. Or, drugs and a ring rat. It's not the money. It's being a star! It's the glory and the pussy!"

But the most tragic instance of a wrestler who challenged the *power of the pencil* involved Frank Donald Goodish who wrestled as Bruiser Brody. In 1988, Frank was murdered in a Puerto Rican locker room after he argued with the *booker's* instructions for his match's *finish,* or perhaps his money. I've always been interested in the circumstances of Frank's death because I knew him and I'd also wrestled in Puerto Rico where Frank was stabbed to death. I got acquainted with Frank in 1983 when he was booked to wrestle on an Atlanta show that I promoted with Thunderbolt Patterson. We had asked Frank to wrestle because we were running an *opposition* promotion and had to book *outlaw* wrestlers, and Frank was probably wrestling's most famous *outlaw* in the early 1980s. As a stubbornly independent guy, Frank insisted on wrestling when and where he wanted to and generally refused to do *jobs,* to lose.

Frank was another wrestler with a football background, having played college ball at both the University of Iowa and West Texas State and was a member of the Washington Redskins taxi squad in 1968 before he was cut during his second season. Frank entered wrestling in 1973 and his six foot five inch, 300 pounds and athletic ability got him an immediate *push.* After Frank developed a successful *gimmick* with a style of brawling regarded as the most believable in all of wrestling, he drew large crowds when *pushed* in main event matches and permitted to win. With his success, he became vigilant about his *payoffs* and match instructions but if his money was right and he didn't have to lose, Frank put on a hell of a show, brawling all over the arena and *juicing* often. By the early 1980s, however, Frank was regarded as a troublemaker by many promoters and when they wouldn't use him, Frank booked himself on frequent tours of Japan and Puerto Rico and

with small, independent promotions in the States. In the spring of 1988, Frank argued with the *booker* after a tag team match in Puerto Rico. He had been asked to make his local opponents look good although he wasn't asked to lose. But when Frank got to the ring, he noticed Japanese wrestling magazine photographers at ringside. Instead of *selling* for his opponents, Frank refused to let them do their moves. He was dependent on those lucrative Japan tours, and he worried about dents in his invincible imagery. In the summer of 1988, Frank returned to Puerto Rico for a fateful match with former University of Georgia footballer Danny Spivey at Bayamon Stadium. Before his match, Frank argued in the locker room with *booker* Jose Huertas Figueroa (Jose Huertas Gonzalez), one of the promotion's owners who also wrestled as a *heel*, when he gave Frank his instructions. Those who were there said Huertas instructed Frank to *put over* Spivey, who had been getting a *push.* When Frank refused to *do the job* and Huertas wouldn't change the script, Frank packed his bags and headed for the door. Then Huertas called Frank into the showers where Frank was stabbed several times in the abdomen. While Frank lay bleeding on the locker room floor, the wrestling show went on without him. Hours later, an ambulance took him to a hospital where he died early the next morning from a punctured liver.

Although the murder weapon was never found, Huertas was arrested and charged with first-degree murder but released on $12,000 bail and he returned to Puerto Rico's TV wrestling show where he was *turned babyface;* some said the *heel* to *babyface* turn was intended to influence potential jurors in the forthcoming criminal trial. Other developments following Frank's death were also peculiar: of the 14 wrestlers present in the dressing room the night of the stabbing and who gave statements to police, only loyal Puerto Rican wrestlers testified; oddly, four American wrestlers who witnessed the killing did not testify. One American wrestler, Tony Atlas (Anthony White), who told police he witnessed the entire incident later said he had received death threats. In the absence of witnesses or other evidence that specifically linked *booker* Jose Huertas to first-degree murder, the charges were later reduced to voluntary homicide. In February 1989, a Puerto Rican jury of eight men and four women *acquitted* Huertas of all criminal charges in Frank's death after deliberating for *less than an hour.*

Several months later, an American criminologist helped me obtain a copy of all documents associated with the case. After months of stonewalling and reluctance to cooperate, the chief judge of the Bayamon General Tribunal of Justice finally provided a complete copy of the Spanish-language case file (presented publicly here for the first time). Frank's case file raises even more questions about the investigation and prosecution of Frank's murder. For one thing, Frank's autopsy report is surprisingly shallow, focusing on a forensic analysis of Frank's hair; although needle puncture wounds on Frank's arms were noted, no drug analysis was undertaken; a transcript of the police interview with Jose Huertas' business partner in the promotion Carlos Colon contains innumerable "I don't recall - I don't remember" responses that were not challenged by interrogation; the case file is devoid of police reports or interviews with the American wrestlers who witnessed the stabbing - Tony Atlas and the Youngblood brothers; court documents reveal that subpoenas for the trial appearance of the American wrestlers were *never* served (later, the four American wrestlers revealed that subpoenas and plane tickets for them to testify were delivered *after* the trial ended).

Then there is this document in Frank's file: an unsolicited, handwritten letter addressed to the Puerto Rican trial judge, received just hours *after* the jury verdict. The letter, signed in undecipherable handwriting, was apparently sent by a witness to Frank's stabbing. The letter says (translated from Spanish): *"Dear Judge, In the case of Mr. Jose Huertas, there are a lot of different versions, and they've changed. First of all, Mr. Huertas called Brody to the showers. He had a knife under the towel in his hand, and he also had intentions to kill him.. And Colon and [Victor] Jovica [another promotional partner] knew what was going to happen. Because, in addition, Huertas wanted Brody to have a match with Danny Spivey and for him to lose the match so that Colon would have a match with Spivey. And Brody didn't want that humiliation. That's why there was an argument about money owed to Brody by Huertas.*

"When Colon went to the showers, he saw that Huertas was holding Brody by the hair and at the same time he inflicted a weapon in the stomach. At that time, Huertas left, running with the towel in his hands, covered with blood. He took his keys, went outside of the showers and came

back inside as if nothing had happened, and had his match. He fought after what happened and it was as if he just killed an animal.

"Even so, this is all due to the fact that Huertas wanted to fix a fight for Brody. However·, due to his pride, Brody refused to do so. Colon and Jovica, are owners of the corporation, and Huertas is a stockholder and third man who did all the arrangements for fights. They call him the booker. Consequently, all this has to be investigated more because there was a contract signed by Brody - a good man and a student of law in Texas, coming out this year. But Colon knew more, and so did Jovica and Huertas. They had already commented that they were going to kill him. 'I'll kill that son of a bitch. I'm going to kill him.!' - were the words said by Huertas"

But that letter to the trial judge did not prompt a re-examination of the facts of Frank's murder. The trial had been held, a jury verdict reached and the case was closed. Three days after his death, Frank's body was cremated and a funeral was held in Puerto Rico. Back in Berne, Texas, Frank's wife Barbara was left alone to explain to seven year-old Geoffrey why his daddy died and wouldn't be coming home. I don't know what Barbara told Geoffrey that day, but I wonder if she explained to Frank's son pro wrestling's *power of the pencil.*

Chapter 5

B L A C K M A I L A N D B L A C K B A L L

ONE HOT, HUMID summer night in 1972 the future world wrestling champion Jack Brisco called me from Tampa. " Ray died last night in Savannah," he said. Not quite believing, I replied, "What'd you say, Jack?" Jack repeated the grim news. Overweight and middle aged, Ray Gunkel's heart had given out on the dressing room floor after his match. Ironically, Ray had wrestled the menacing *heel* Ox Baker and *sold* Baker's heart punch *gimmick.* The heart punch was Baker's *finisher,* a quick shot to his opponent's heart area with a gloved fist, pulled as usual.

Just a year earlier, wrestler Alberto Torres died in nearly identical circumstances, also after *succumbing* to Baker's heart punch. Poor Ox. Despite his ferocious looks - a six foot six, 300 pound hairy mountain of a man with a shaved head and the bushiest and blackest eyebrows and mustache you ever saw - he was actually a sweet and sensitive guy. After both deaths, the pro wrestling hype credited him for killing two opponents: *Come And See A Real Killer!* Wrestling promoters had a saying - *"If you 're gonna die, die in the ring. It's good for business!"* This is one of the ugly aspects of The Business - no event, however tragic in reality, is so sacred it cannot be used as an *angle.* I don't think Foxy Oxy liked that part of wrestling; his heart punch had nothing to do with either death. Of course, had adequate medical or paramedical assistance been available, both Ray Gunkel and Alberto Torres might have been saved. They both died because of a situation that takes about two aging, out of shape wrestlers each year: a heart attack incurred after strenuous exercise.

Ray Gunkel's death marked the end of a certain level of civility to the southeastern wrestling scene and it signaled a milestone and turning point in my wrestling career. After the funeral, his 35 year-old widow Ann proceeded to take over Ray's interest in the old Georgia NWA promotion. At the time of his death, Ray owned majority interest in the Georgia NWA office, which had been organized as ABC Booking, Inc. with Paul Jones, Buddy Fuller (Welch) and a silent partner, William Hartman. But Ray

actually ran the Georgia promotion on a day-today basis. After Ray's death, Paul Jones and Buddy Fuller (Welch) bought out Hartman, closed down ABC Booking and established Mid- South Sports, Inc. with Ray's widow Ann squeezed out. When Ann objected to being forced out, the intra-office squabble erupted into a full-fledged wrestling turf war in which Ann fought with not only Jones and Fuller but the entire National Wrestling Alliance mat monopoly. This Georgia wrestling war, called *The Battle For Atlanta*, raged for two years (and I'll describe it in detail in the next chapter). After two months of fighting with Jones and Fuller, Ann started her own promotion, named All-South Wrestling Alliance. Now frantic, Jones and Fuller called their NWA friends around the country for talent. When Fuller called me in Charlotte where I was wrestling for Crockett, I returned immediately to Atlanta to help them out. Although I'd been wrestling in the football offseasons for five years, this was my first year full-time in wrestling and I wanted the NWA to know I was a loyal team player.

After I rejoined the NWA's Georgia circuit, they put me in tag teams with Robert Fuller (Welch) as my partner. Robert was just breaking into wrestling, following his older brother Ron Fuller (Welch) and his father Buddy Fuller (Welch), part owner of the Georgia promotion who wrestled as well. The Fuller name was famous in the south's wrestling business, one of the kingpin families that controlled wrestling in western Florida, Alabama and Tennessee for many years. The family's patriarch was Roy Welch who'd accumulated a fortune as one of the original members of the NWA, and old Roy got most of the other men in his family involved in wrestling, all using the ring name *Fuller.* Roy's nephew Lester Fuller (Welch) was a partner with Eddie Graham in Florida, and controlled wrestling in the Caribbean. In time, Lester's sons, Roy Lee Welch and Jackie Lee Welch, entered wrestling. Roy's son Buddy Fuller (Edward Welch) wrestled as Cowboy Buddy Fuller, was Ray Gunkel's partner in Georgia and owned a thousand acre farm in Locust Grove, a little town off highway 75 about 40 miles south of Atlanta. He had a ring in an old barn where he trained his sons Ron and Robert to wrestle, and both Ron ("The Tennessee Stud") and Robert ("The New Tennessee Stud") wrestled for many years in the Alabama and Tennessee area.

With Ray Gunkel now dead, the Fuller (Welch) family asserted itself in the fight for control of the NWA's Georgia promotion. With the new

ownership, the Fuller boys Ron and Robert were getting the preferential *push,* and other wrestlers resented it. They also resented some new familism involving Eddie Graham. At about this time, Graham launched a wrestling career for his son Mike Graham (Gossett), which bothered other wrestlers who viewed Mike as too small. So the Georgia takeover was as much motivated by greed as nepotism. At that point, I didn't care much about the politics of pro wrestling. I just wanted to wrestle and work myself up the ladder in the NWA. But after the NWA boys forced Ann out of Ray's promotion, she invited all the wrestlers who previously worked for Ray to join her group, and many did. unlike most of the other guys, I didn't want to jump to her new promotional group even though she was Ray's widow. When she made a specific offer one night at an Atlanta Christmas party in 1972 - "Honey, we'll give you $750 a week and our Georgia championship title if you come with us" - I thanked her, but declined the offer. I told her my loyalties were to the NWA, especially the Brisco brothers, Jack and Jerry.

By now, Jack had already been told by Eddie Graham that he was next in line for the NWA's world belt, and to set up the *strap* switch, he and champion Dory Funk, Jr. were working a *program* in many cities - incredible, sweat-soaked, sixty-minute *broadways* that *told a story* - young, good-looking and smooth-as-silk Jack Brisco was nipping at the heels of the world champion, and this new technically skilled and crowd-pleasing *babyface* could be the new champ almost anytime, any night. Their long, agonizing and emotional matches were as close as pro wrestling ever gets to compelling theater. Now, their *program* would be speeded up a little, since giving Jack Brisco the *strap* was one of the aces to be played in Georgia during *The Battle For Atlanta.* There was yet another reason for my loyalty to the NWA - I had organized a real estate investment partnership with five of the top NWA wrestlers - Jack and Jerry Brisco, Tim Woods, Johnny Walker and Paul Jones (Paul Frederick). I had done this a year or so earlier after seeing that pro wrestlers had no pension plan or other retirement benefits, and so I created a real estate holding company that would buy and lease apartments and warehouses and produce a comfortable retirement income and tax benefits for the *boys* who wanted to join. Only these five guys wanted to participate, knowing I was probably the only wrestler around who had experience with pension plans (in the NFL) and knowledge of real estate.

So I declined working for Ann Gunkel's group and returned to Georgia wrestling with Ray's old NWA group in early 1973. One night in the Macon dressing room, Eddie Graham approached me with a booking offer. He said, "Jim, I've got an opportunity for you. Would you be interested in going to Australia for $800 a week?" I guess Jack Brisco had told Eddie I wanted to work in other territories. I said, "Sure, I'd love to." He said, "Well, I think I've got a *spot* open for you right now if you want to go." I said, "Great." After I explained to Nita and the kids that I'd be gone for awhile, the arrangements proceeded quickly and I left for a twelve-week tour of Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania in April 1973.

The NWA's promoter in Australia was James Edward Barnett, an American. I had never met Jim Barnett, but I'd heard his name mentioned often during my years in wrestling. He got his start in The Business when he was a student at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s and contacted Fred Kohler, the NWA's Chicago promoter who employed Barnett to edit *Wrestling As You Like It,* a nationally circulated wrestling magazine. With Kohler his mentor, Barnett learned the TV wrestling business when the old DuMont Network broadcast wrestling shows from Chicago throughout the nation. Later, Kohler and Barnett had a falling out, and Barnett moved from Chicago to promote wrestling on his own in Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan, Colorado, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Barnett left the U.S. in 1964 after selling his Ohio-Michigan territory to The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) for $50,000 and his Colorado territory to Verne Gagne. With former California promoter John Doyle (who earlier had a management contract with Gorgeous George) and a new business partner (his college friend James F. Oates of Chicago), Barnett promoted wrestling in Australia, where one of Doyle's acquaintances wanted somebody to put wrestling on TV. Barnett's Sydney-based *World Championship Wrestling* promoted thousands of wrestling shows in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Sydney and smaller cities and because of a tax incentive given American investors by the Australian government, Barnett reportedly made millions in Australia.

I also knew that Barnett was regarded as one of the more sophisticated figures in The Business, a man of the arts as well as letters. The Brisco brothers often talked about Barnett and the expensive gifts he'd given them; they said they always got preferential treatment when they wrestled in Australia. They intimated that their relationship with Barnett was closer than that of other guys, but it wasn't something they seemed to want to talk about. Or felt good about. I got the impression that Jim Barnett, like Eddie Graham, was another one of wrestling's *godfathers.* Both Jack and Jerry encouraged me to take the Australia tour, and assured me that Barnett would treat me well.

Before I left Atlanta for Sydney, I telephoned Barnett to introduce myself and confirm my booking. We agreed that I'd come in for $800 a week for a minimum of 12 weeks and if I liked it over there and did a good job, I could stay as long as I wanted. Barnett said there might be an opportunity to increase my money. It was agreed I'd be used as a *babyface*, the All-American boy. Barnett knew I was friendly with the Brisco brothers, and said the Briscos and Eddie Graham had spoken highly of me - "You're going to like Wilson," Jack had told him. On the phone that night, Barnett said, "Oh my boy, I've heard so many wonderful things about you." And he acknowledged receiving the publicity photos I sent. "You look wonderful. You look marvelous. They'll love you." I said, "Hey great, I'm looking forward to coming over."

But there was another reason Jim Barnett's name often came up when wrestlers exchanged gossip and rumors - he was gay. And in a macho business like pro wrestling, *that* lifestyle preference got some attention. Beyond wrestler gossip, however, I had unexpectedly learned more about Barnett from a business associate in Georgia real estate. This business acquaintance (here, called Jason which is not his real name) had been a basketball player at another Georgia school when I was playing football at the University of Georgia. He was about my age, 32, and we had became friendly after we worked on a few real estate deals together, years after college. One day, many months prior to my departure for Australia, we met for lunch to talk about an upcoming property deal. Somewhere between drinks and salad, our conversation drifted when Jason asked, "Do you happen to know *Jim Barnett*??" I replied, "The *wrestling promoter*?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, I know he's the promoter in Australia and

he used to promote wrestling over here in the Midwest." Jason knew I was in wrestling, but I had no idea he was acquainted with Barnett or how well he knew Barnett. Jason told quite a story: this former collegiate basketball star said he'd been having a homosexual liaison with Barnett since high school days back in Kentucky where Barnett promoted wrestling before he went to Australia. I was shocked. I knew Jason enjoyed women, but I sure didn't know he went both ways. According to Jason, Barnett and a couple of his gay friends would come down to Atlanta from Lexington on weekends to party with jocks recruited from local colleges. Jason said they'd get some motel rooms, fill up the bathtubs with booze, and have food catered from a restaurant. Then they'd go out and buy some strippers to entertain the athletes. And after they got the guys drunk, they liked to watch them screw the strippers; after the guys screwed the girls, Barnett would invite the guys to do him.

Jason said his double life with Barnett had continued over several years because of Barnett's generosity: money and clothes and trips.

And women. Jason said he got everything he wanted just by doing a little trick. He wasn't in love with Barnett, he said, and regarded himself as straight. But he expected that Barnett, who was 20 years older, would someday remember him in his will. Jason and I finished our lunch and went our separate ways, and I didn't think much more about what he had told me. By now, having spent 14 years in football, I'd seen and heard just about everything that was wild and crazy, and none of what I'd been told by Jason seemed important. Jason was just another wild and crazy jock.

After kissing Nita and the kids goodbye for a few weeks, I was eager to see a part of the world I had only read about, and get paid for this tour around the world by doing a little wrestling each evening. Upon arrival in Sydney, I proceeded to the Texas House, a hotel where touring wrestlers stayed. After relaxing for awhile and calling Nita, I made my way to the arena for my match that evening. In the Sydney dressing room before the matches, I met the man about whom I had heard so much and I immediately understood why neither I nor anyone else had ever seen a photograph of

him. Short and fiftyish, he sashayed around the room with a drink in one hand and the other hand on his hip. His voice was nasal and cutting. When he turned around, pirouette style, he swished about in an expensive well tailored suit. He was exactly what they told me: the stereotyped three dollar bill, a living caricature of every comedian's imitation of the proverbial aging queen. As soon as I saw him, I knew who he was.

After a few minutes, he waltzed over to where I was standing. "Oh Jim my boy, so good to see you. We're looking forward to having you," he gushed as we shook hands. As I dressed for my match, he politely inquired about the plane trip and whether the hotel room was satisfactory. Impatient with the smalltalk, I cut to the quick: "By the way," I said bluntly, "Jason sends his regards." As soon as I said that, he knew that I knew a lot of things and his eyes opened wide. "Oh yes, Jason and I have known each other for years and years and years," he gushed. I told him that Jason and I had worked together on some real estate deals. I wanted him to know upfront that I knew about his arrangement with Jason and didn't want anything to do with that. I don't know whether my subtle message registered or not, but in light of later developments, I concluded either it didn't or Barnett chose to ignore it.

Barnett was talkative. He rambled on about the Brisco brothers, Ray Gunkel's death, Eddie Graham and other people we both knew in The Business. But he talked mostly about the wrestling war in Georgia, really getting into the business end of things. He knew about all the wrestlers leaving the NWA group, that they lost their television and some local promoters, and had been devastated. He had known Ray Gunkel, he said. And he knew Ray had been grooming me for big things in the wrestling world. He said he was in frequent contact with Eddie Graham, working on a plan to get Ann Gunkel out of the wrestling business. I was surprised he was so knowledgeable about the Atlanta wrestling war, a skirmish about 9,000 miles away. As we talked and I put on my tights, I watched Barnett watching me and I could tell he liked what he saw. He introduced me to his *booker* Mark Lewin, who had been one of wrestling's stars in the late 1950s as a champion tag team partner of Don Curtis (Don Beitleman) on the west coast. Now in his 40s, he was *booking* while still wrestling as "The Purple Haze" or "Maniac" Mark Lewin. Lewin introduced me to my opponent for the evening, a local wrestler, and he told him to *do a job* for me.

The next morning, I wrestled on the Sydney TV show and then caught a flight to Melbourne for another wrestling show that night. I boarded the plane with the other wrestlers on the tour - Spiros Arion (Andres Labrakis), Don Carson, Bill Dundee, Waldo von Erich (Walter Sieber), Johnny Grey, Big Bad John and Hans Schroeder - and located a seat with other *babyfaces.* Just before takeoff, Barnett walked back from First Class to Coach, where the wrestlers were seated and said, “Come up and sit with me, I’d like to talk with you.” Well, Barnett was not only the boss but owned a piece of Trans-Australia Airways, so I sat where he told me to sit.

During the flight to Melbourne, we continued our conversation about the Atlanta wrestling war. Barnett talked about a plan to squeeze Lester Fuller (Welch) out of The Business by putting Fuller in the middle of the Georgia wrestling war, a plot that had already been revealed to me by Jack Brisco but which I permitted Barnett to retell. The plot involved getting Lester Fuller, who nobody liked, to trade out his shares of the Caribbean operation with his cousin Buddy Fuller (Welch), Ray’s former partner in Georgia. Buddy apparently wanted to retire and move south, and Eddie Graham wanted to get rid of Lester. The new Georgia ownership would be painted as a good business opportunity for Lester. Then, after Lester was put in the middle of the Georgia turf war, the NWA guys would let the Georgia promotion die temporarily by freezing the inflow of wrestling talent. After the Georgia promotion’s value had diminished, they’d hold a fire sale. When Lester’s stock was practically worthless, he’d sell out - to Jim Barnett. That was the long-range plan, that Barnett would move to Atlanta to rebuild the Georgia promotion after it was intentionally destroyed. Barnett said his tax dispensation in Australia had run its course, the new government was unfriendly to American businesses, and he wanted to leave the country.

The strategy to get rid of Lester and drive down the price of Ray Gunkel’s old promotion was a clever plot, more creative than any wrestling *angle* I’d seen. But as Barnett confided in me its details, I noticed how he was looking at me. It was an intense, clamped on eyeball-to-eyeball contact that made my skin crawl. I’d been hit on before by men, but I was still uncomfortable with it. And I had met gay men in all walks of life, including NFL football where I was Dave Kopay’s 49er teammate in 1965 and 1966, long before he came out of the closet. But I sensed Barnett was leading me

on to something that I didn't care to pursue. Perhaps I'd been told too much about the guy - all of those steamy details about his obsession with young, muscular jocks and what he asked them to do to him. Whatever it was, I was relieved when the plane landed in Melbourne and I could get on with my assignment to just wrestle.

After that night's show in Melbourne, in which I beat up another local *gebroney,* there was a big party for Barnett. He was celebrating his 49th birthday and his ninth consecutive year on Australian TV. It was a typical rich bigshots' party with lots of booze, expensive *hor d'oeuvres* and nice looking women. At one point, Barnett glided over to me with a drink in his hand. A little tipsy, he slurred, *"My boy, you're one of my stars. The people just love you*." "Hey great," I replied, backing away.

The next day, Barnett left the troupe of wrestlers and returned to Sydney. I spent the rest of the week doing shows in Adelaide, Perth and other smaller cities. At the beginning of the second week, the troupe again flew from Sydney to Melbourne. And Barnett again accompanied us but he sat with me during the brief flight. "How's it going?," he asked. "Great," I replied. And I meant it. I was enjoying the travel, everything was upbeat and I was loving it. On this flight, our conversation was less superficial as we discussed the Atlanta wrestling situation in more detail. Barnett confided some other plans for solving the Georgia wrestling war by getting rid of Ann Gunkel's *opposition* promotion. He said he was about to leave for the States for a few weeks, to take a working vacation in Georgia. A kind of troubleshooting mission to get all this strategy set up and squared away. He'd be meeting with Eddie Graham and the Brisco brothers, he said.

As Barnett rambled on, it became clear he was a little full of himself, perceiving his role in The Business as a kind of czar. He often recited this peculiar line: "I *deal only with kings, prime ministers and dictators in the expanding wrestling business*." Barnett regarded political deals as his special calling. He told me how he cut kickback deals to promote wrestling with corrupt officials in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, the capitol of Malaysia, and other places. He bragged about it. He also bragged about his ability to *cut the gate back with the boys,* attempting to document, I guess, his capacity to screw in the nonsexual area as well. *Cutting back the gate* refers to several methods wrestling promoters used to disguise actual ticket revenue by reselling tickets already sold so that the official spectator count

is at odds with the number of tickets sold. He was particularly pleased his wrestlers still made money, even when he *cut back the gates.*

As he chattered on, he dropped his hand on my leg and slowly moved it. I was getting more uneasy but said nothing. Then Barnett changed the topic to airline stewardesses, and he wanted to know *how I was doing.* When I tried to terminate this line of questioning, he began a short dissertation about fringe benefits in the wrestling business. By now, he got to where he would touch me, rubbing his leg against me. He was definitely coming on to me. He said, "Let the girls come around the matches because that's one of the fringe benefits - and the girls will bring friends and it all sells tickets." When Barnett effused, "Jim, everybody seems to like you and they love your wrestling," I recognized the preliminary maneuvering for what it was. Perhaps because I didn't slap at his wandering hands and leg, Barnett concluded I was a wild, crazy jock like Jason. Just another one of the guys who liked to party and raise hell. After all, Barnett had been doing it for 25 years so he knew all about it.

As before, we returned to Sydney for the Friday night matches. Again, I was *put over* by another nameless face. After the matches, I walked out of the arena with my gym bag toward my hotel when Barnett intercepted me in the parking lot. "Oh Jim, my boy," he called. "I want to talk with you," he said. *"I'd like you to come up to the penthouse, tonight."* Barnett lived across the street from Sydney's Texas House at the Chevron Hotel. I didn't say anything, contemplating the situation and my response. Before I could reply, he continued his invitation: "*Jim,, I want you to come up and I want to see you. You have a great body. I'm in a position to be instrumental in your career, and I can make you world champion*," he said.

By the time he finished his proposition, I had already formulated my response. I said, " Jim, I'm not a wild and crazy jock like Jason. I've already been told I have the makings to be the next world champion, and I don't have to sell my body to get the *strap.* I don't want to have anything to do with that." Barnett turned ashen, but he said nothing. He dropped it right there. He said he was late for something and turned around, walking off into a large shadow.

The next morning at the TV studio in Sydney I was matched with another local *gebroney.* I knew the Australian would be doing another *job* for me, but *booker* Lewin hadn't told me the *finish.* While I was lacing my

boots, Lewin walked over. “The other guy’s *going over* in 10 minutes,” he said matter of factly. I was surprised. “I don’t understand,” I replied. “Well, we’re trying to establish some of these local guys now,” Lewin said. “That’s the word I got from Barnett, and that’s the way he wants it.” By now, Barnett had left for his troubleshooting mission to Atlanta. He would be gone for several weeks, but he had left *booking* instructions with Lewin before leaving. Still a model *babyface,* I followed instructions and lost to the local *gebroney* in ten minutes.

After the TV taping, I went to the Melbourne arena for my match that evening. It was a tag match, and I was sitting in the locker room waiting for Lewin to call the *finish.* “They’re going to *take the fall* on you, Jim,” he said. Now, I was upset. This was my first real shock in The Business: suddenly, they were having me lose to guys who were so much smaller it was obvious to all the wrestlers that they were *killing* me off. And it was obvious to me why they were doing it. But I was determined to finish the tour, collect my money and then get the hell out of there.

During the following week, I had a match every night, and I was ordered to *do a job* in virtually all of them. Although I complained to other wrestlers about my *finishes*, I didn’t tell them *why* my matches were ending that way. I had become friends with two local guys, Johnny Grey and Bill Dundee, who later wrestled in the Memphis area for many years. Johnny Grey was my closest friend, and he and I went to pubs at night after the matches. I learned from Johnny that local wrestlers held a lot of resentment toward Barnett. He not only cheated them on their money, but they had to lose to the American guys brought in for the tours. They at least expected that imported American wrestlers would be used to draw money because the gates affected their *payoffs*, too. So my losing affected them as well, and they complained. Johnny wondered why I wasn’t being used right, concluding that I must have done something to make Barnett unhappy. Johnny said Barnett’s homosexuality was common knowledge and if Barnett took a liking to you, he had to consummate it. Some of the Australian wrestlers did impersonations of Barnett’s gait and speaking style out of his presence, and everybody laughed. One of the wrestlers’ favorite gag lines was “Here he comes, just keep your backs to the wall.” All in all, a gay promoter in the wrestling industry struck wrestlers as too suspicious

to be a coincidence, which is why they privately referred to him as *Jane E. Barnett.*

When one wrestler speculated that my treatment was probably the result of not *doing the deed,* I said nothing. A couple of guys said it had happened before, but I remained silent. Johnny Grey said I was being treated worse than Australian wrestlers, but as close as we were, I couldn't tell him why. Instead, I bit my tongue and gritted myself. It wasn't easy to lose in front of those audiences after I'd been *pushed* in previous weeks. The fans must have been confused when they were *killing* me off. I became depressed but I kept it to myself. I still called home to check on the family once a week, but I told Nita only that I was disappointed in how I was being used. After another week on the tour, *booker* Lewin took obvious satisfaction in telling me my pay was being cut from $800 to $700 a week. When I asked why, Lewin said, *"You were making too much money. When you're losing, you shouldn't be making $800 a week."* he said. Well, I didn't have a signed agreement and so that was that. I just decided to do what they wanted me to do, get my money and get out of there.

Some of the other wrestlers speculated my difficulties were caused by Lewin's booking jealousy. Lewin wrestled then as a *babyface*, and other wrestlers told me it was just about impossible for another *babyface* to *get over* so long as Lewin was *booking.* Every night, Lewin tried to get himself *over,* and was having a hard time. He was doing a lot of wild matches with blood and crazy *angles.* And Lewin was not about to let another *babyface* outshine him or take the spotlight away from him. I saw Jim Barnett on just one other occasion before I left the tour. When he returned from Atlanta, I talked to him briefly in the Melbourne locker room. Walking straight toward him, I said, "Jim, I'm very disappointed in how I've been treated." He replied curtly: "Sorry it didn't work out the way that you had hoped it would, my boy. You might as well just leave." "Fine," I said, "I'll be on the next plane out of here." "Well, we've got you booked in matches for next week," Barnett whined. And I said, "Well, I want to finish up next week and then leave."

Then I told Barnett, "You know, I'd like you to refer me to a doctor here, an orthopedic guy who can x-ray my back and take a look at it. " I didn't bother to tell Barnett the details because I assumed he already knew: a couple of nights earlier, in another match with Waldo, he had surprised me

when he grabbed me for a suplex off the ropes. It was surprising because I'd already told Waldo weeks earlier to take it easy on my injured back. And when Waldo started to lift me that night, I tried to block him but couldn't. I had landed on the mat hard, square on my spinal injury and I'd felt stiff ever since. I had already concluded that Waldo had been told to *stretch* me, to teach me something important about The Business and to make my departure from Australia come a little quicker. Barnett at least feigned interest in my injury and recommended I see a Syndey doctor whose offices were near the beach. His x-rays, he said, were inconclusive and I didn't learn that I'd suffered a hairline fracture of a lower lumbar vertebrae until I got home to Atlanta and visited another doctor weeks later. And I never saw Waldo again, but I'll never forget him.

Leaving the tour after I'd been advertised would have created even more problems, so I stayed another week. But my last days in Australia were memorable. For one thing, I lost every match but I expected that. For another, I had a dangerous encounter with another wrestler out of the ring. After my last show in Sydney, I went back to the hotel where Big Bad John (Billy Goodson) knocked on my door and invited me to his room for a drink. Big Bad John was another American who'd been wrestling for a long time and with success. His *gimmick* was the sinister Nazi *heel,* for which he wore a beard, long hair and a German army helmet, and he could manipulate a crowd like few *heels* I'd seen. John also was a close friend of Lewin. More importantly, however, John was the *wrestlers' pharmacist* in Australia - he provided all marihuana and speed that wrestlers wanted.

I walked into John's room which was next to mine, and he poured a glass of cognac and invited me to sit down and listen to a local radio talk show with him. We listened and talked and drank cognac for a couple of hours, and we amused ourselves by calling the radio show and joining the discussion by telephone. After awhile, John suggested if we were to stay up all night, we'd need some chemical help and he produced a handful of pills which he said was speed. The only times I'd taken speed was in college when I stayed up all night to study for final exams, a common practice in those days, and in the NFL during the *pre-game meal.* But I accepted John's hospitality and took one. John offered me another, but I declined. I was not oblivious to the possible problems of mixing speed with booze, but John insisted I take more speed. As early morning wore on, John continued to

pass the pills. At this point, I popped them into my mouth and held them under my tongue until I got up to go to the bathroom where I spit them into the toilet. After one of these trips to the bathroom, I walked back to the sofa and noticed John had just dropped something into my drink. I don't know what he put in my glass and didn't want to find out; I never finished that last drink.

I overslept the next morning and missed the plane to Perth but rejoined the wrestling troupe in Brisbane the next day. But there was no doubt in my mind I could have become another dead wrestler the night before. I knew John and Mark Lewin were close, and I knew John was aware that Lewin had *heat* with me. Had John tried to do me in? I would never know for sure. Months later, John was arrested for cocaine smuggling at the Atlanta airport and although Barnett was able to get him released from jail, John was ultimately killed in a Los Angeles drug deal in 1980. Before that, however, I would encounter John again in Nashville in 1976 (as discussed later).

There was another bizarre incident during that final week in Australia. One night in the locker room before a match with Waldo von Erich (who wrestled as Fritz von Erich's brother in the 1960s and early 1970s), the *booker* Lewin walked over to give me the *finish* and the time. "Waldo is *going over* in 40 minutes with a clean pin *in the middle*," he said. I wasn't surprised, and I just looked at him. "And Wilson, we want you to *gig* yourself. *And I want you to get a lot of blood"* he said. "Well I don't do that," I replied. In six years, I'd spent about 27 months in wrestling, and that was still one thing I had no interest in. I would take all the *bumps*, but I refused to cut myself. I had *gigged* myself a few times, but I didn't like it and didn't think it necessary. I thought I had enough other things going for me that I didn't have to carve up my forehead. But this night, it was pretty clear Lewin wasn't going to let the matter go.

"Oh well, that's no problem, I'll get Waldo to do it for you," Lewin said. Almost immediately, Waldo moved toward his gym bag, reaching inside for scissors and razor blades. Then he started cutting up a razor, wrapping the fragments in tape. When he looked up at me, grinning, I said, "No, I don't want anybody touching me." Lewin was volunteering Waldo's fingers on the *blade*, but I wasn't about to let Waldo or anyone else *gig* me. Although wrestlers will occasionally *gig* another if the other guy doesn't know how to do it, I had been warned when I first entered The Business by

veterans - “If you do it, do it to yourself because someone can fuck you up good.” And I’d been told stories about guys getting their heads laid half open with deep cuts near the eyes. But Lewin was persistent: *“Well Jim,, this is the way it’s going to be because if you don’t, you’re not going to get your plane ticket”* he said. Well, I was flying back to Sydney that night to get my things and go home but Lewin had my ticket and paycheck for the week. I just looked at Lewin, wanting to punch him out but I figured this will be the last *shot* with these assholes. “OK, give me the fuckin’ thing,” I snapped. When we got to the ring, I let Waldo throw me down a couple of times and when I was over by the ropes, I nicked myself on the bridge of my nose where I have scar tissue that opens quickly. And so, in my final match in Australia, *I juiced to get paid and my ticket home.*

Before I left Australia, I did a little shopping for Nita and the kids. Although my down-under wrestling tour was not a happy one, I wanted to bring my family something from that strange and beautiful place. I bought some jewelry for Nita and toys for Josh, Brad and Brett and got kangaroo pouch purses for Suzanne and Christina. Now, I couldn’t wait to get home to see Nita and the kids after a troubling series of events halfway around the world.

On the way home, I stopped in New Zealand for a series of matches with “Irish” Pat Barrett, the “champion of Ireland.” The local promoter asked me to *heel* and *put* Barrett *over,* and I agreed. We worked four main event cards in Christchurch, Wellington, Auckland and Dunedin where the New Zealand press tagged me *Wild Willie Wilson.* Barrett and I had some good matches for his *world championship of Ireland,* although we used the same script in each city. On each night, I took the first fall in about 20 minutes; this was expected because Barrett was about half my size at five feet ten and maybe 220 pounds. Then we surprised them when Pat took a quick second fall with a rollup. In the third and deciding fall, we struggled for about 30 minutes, exchanging the advantage; ultimately, Pat staged a superman comeback and overcame me though grit and stamina. The crowds loved it.

Before flying to Atlanta, I stopped in Honolulu for a few days to simmer down. Nita and the kids would have loved the beaches and I called home to tell them about it. One afternoon as I was relaxing on Waikikian sand I noticed a familiar physique lying a few yards away. When I told him he looked familiar and introduced myself, he said, “Glad to meet you, Jim. My name’s Ken Patera.” The year before, Patera placed fourth in superheavyweight weightlifting at the 1972 Munich Olympics and was the first American to clean-and-jerk more than 500 pounds. As Ken and I spent the afternoon talking, we discovered some mutual interests. His brother Jack was a football player, later coach of the Seattle Seahawks, and Ken said he’d recently entered pro wrestling in the Midwest for Minneapolis promoter Verne Gagne who promised him $50,000 a year. I told him a little about The Business and wished him well but I didn’t tell him what I should have. I was still too much the proud fool to share wrestling’s real secrets.

There is an odd footnote to that afternoon I spent talking with Ken Patera in Honolulu. Months later, Ken wrestled on the Georgia circuit for Jim Barnett who asked Ken to *stretch Wilson* (as discussed later). When Ken wouldn’t do it, he was told to leave the Georgia territory.

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After returning from Australia, I rejoined the Georgia wrestling circuit in July 1973. It was good to be home with the family. Even though I thought it necessary for my wrestling career to work in Japan and Australia and other territories outside Georgia, I felt guilty about being away so much, leaving Nita with five little kids to care for - Josh was eight, Suzanne 7, Christina 4 and my twin boys Brad and Brett, just two. Now, I resumed wrestling close to home and promised I’d make up for previous absences by being more attentive to Nita and the kids. Although I’d been gone a lot since my Japan tour a year earlier, the Wilson family was healthy and happy living in a beautiful house in north Atlanta and had everything it needed or wanted. My weekly bookings on the Georgia wrestling circuit took me to the familiar stops - Augusta on Mondays, Savannah on Tuesdays, Macon on Wednesdays, Athens on Thursdays, Atlanta on Fridays and a spot show in Carrollton or Griffin, Georgia on Saturdays. The crowd response to my re-

appearances in all the old familiar places was as strong and positive as ever. The Georgia wrestling war, The Battle For Atlanta, was still being fought between the NWA and Ann Gunkel, and I was happy to help the NWA side, the side that had already made an investment in my wrestling career.

A few weeks later in July 1973, Jack finally became the NWA's world champion, and I was happy for him because the NWA promoters who promised him the belt in 1971 kept their word although it took a little longer than planned because Dory Funk, Jr. didn't want to give it back just yet. But a match with tough guy Harley Race and a threatened *shoot* took care of Dory's problem with dropping the *strap.* Jack was patient and, in truth, he was the right man for the champion's job for many reasons - he was a great *worker* and a crowd favorite, having already drawn sellouts with Dory around the country for more than a year. And from the NWA's perspective, he was the perfect champion because he did what he was told, except *gig* himself. As Jack always advised me, *" You've got to go along with the program"* At the time, it seemed he was right - he was now world champion and about to become part owner of both the Florida and Georgia promotions. When I saw Jack a month later in August, he said he'd be soon moving to Atlanta and asked me to be his real estate agent for helping him find a condominium. When Jack revealed how much he wanted to spend, we drove around Atlanta's high rent neighborhoods. As we inspected properties in Atlanta's Buckhead district, Jack brought me up to date on the latest developments in Georgia's wrestling war between the NWA and Ann Gunkel.

Jack said Ann Gunkel's promotion had been doing better than the NWA group and so it was decided that if the NWA was going to win the war, its world champion would have to appear more often in Georgia's wrestling towns. And to do that, Jack said he'd been instructed to move his new wife to a new home near the front lines. Jack said the plan to get rid of Lester Fuller (Welch) and stage a fire-sale of the Georgia promotion was still in effect; that after the NWA's Georgia promotion nosedived, Jim Barnett would buy out Lester's shares and reorganize the promotion as Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc.(GCW). Although Barnett would own most of the promotion's stock (38%), aging Paul Jones, who owned 22%, would be publicly identified as the Georgia promoter (for obvious reasons). As we drove through Atlanta's expensive neighborhoods, I could

tell that Jack was very happy. After only eight years in pro wrestling, he had its world championship, top wages, new business investments (in addition to 5%of Georgia Championship, he also got 8% of Eddie Graham's Florida promotion), a new gorgeous wife and he was about to buy a luxurious second residence that was fully tax-deductible as a business expense.

Between stops in our hunt for Jack's perfect condo, he asked how my Australian tour went, since he knew I returned after only eight weeks of what was to have been a twelve-week tour. I didn't want to tell the entire story, so I recited a watered down version. I told him I was very disappointed in the way things worked out, that *booker* Lewin and I didn't get along and after they'd asked me to do a *blade job,* I refused and left early. But I didn't go into my problem with Barnett. I don't know why I couldn't tell him the whole story, I guess I was embarrassed. It had taken me awhile to accept the guilt that I was now working in show business, a legitimate athlete turned actor; then, on top of that, this sexual proposition - that to advance in this crazy business, I had to go to bed with one of its promoters. I was humiliated by what was happening to my wrestling career, which was nothing like I had expected it to be - *what a bizarre script!* But I also was certain that Jack already knew about my incident with Barnett, although he never hinted he did, and I was uncertain about what I could tell Jack, not knowing whether he and Jerry might know more than they let on. Furthermore, even if I'd told Jack the details, I knew what Jack would likely say: *Go with the program.*. We finally located a condo that Jack liked, a two-bedroom apartment in a large complex with swimming pools, a golf course and landscaped ponds alongside Interstate-20 on Atlanta's east side.

Back home with my family, I intended to put Australia behind me. I just wanted to forget about that brief, ugly chapter of personal history and get on with my wrestling career in Georgia with Ray Gunkel's old NWA office. Although Ray was dead, I believed Ray's plans for my future in wrestling were still alive. And even though Jim Barnett was now the principal stockholder in the Georgia promotion, I'd faced tough situations before and I figured I could beat this one, too. Furthermore, one of Barnett's new partners in both Florida and Georgia was my best friend in wrestling, now world champion. I was confident Jack could solve any problems I had with Barnett or anyone else in the NWA. After all, the world champion and I were very good friends. I worked Atlanta's NWA show the night that Jack defended his world title for the first time. As usual, the new champion and former champion were doing a *program* of rematches, and so he wrestled his predecessor, Harley Race. I wrestled on the *undercard.* After the show, Jack and I got together downtown where we drank beer and talked. I learned he got $1,200 for his match with Harley, whose *payoff* was now $500. I got $100, as did six other wrestlers. I wasn't happy with my *payoff* or place on the card that night and when I said so, Jack told me to be patient; it wasn't the first time I heard that line, and it wouldn't be the last.

During the time I was in Australia, Eddie Graham, Jim Barnett and other NWA promoters refined their strategy to *MU* Ann Gunkel's *opposition* promotion in Georgia. In addition to having Jack Brisco defend his title on a regular basis, they figured they needed four more bullets to shoot down Ann's group. One bullet was getting Gordon Solie to announce Georgia's TV show; Gordon had previously worked TV wrestling with Eddie Graham's Florida operation and was well regarded when sober. Two other bullets were putting Tim Woods and Johnny Walker in main events as Wrestling I and Wrestling II. The final bullet was Bill Watts who was anointed the Georgia NWA group's *booker;* this was *Cowboy* Bill Watts from Bixby, Oklahoma, then regarded as having a good wrestling mind for designing *angles* and *gimmicks.* Watts was given a 10% ownership in the Georgia promotion as inducement to bring his wits to bear on winning the Battle For Atlanta. I'd met William Frederick Watts, Jr. before I went to Australia when he wrestled in Georgia, but never knew what to make of the guy. He was big and loud, immediately letting everybody know who he was. In locker rooms, I overheard his stories to young wrestlers about how

he went from nothing to Madison Square Garden and made it big, *real big*, and made sure everybody knew about that article on him in *Look* magazine in 1954. And he'd done well for himself, acquiring the NWA's Oklahoma and Louisiana regional promotion from blind LeRoy McGuirk.

As a result, I'd been appropriately deferential to this loudmouth and I had solicited his advice about my matches, asking him to watch me in the ring and suggest areas of improvement. I had told Watts I wanted to polish my ring skills to become a more marketable commodity in wrestling, and was willing to pay the price to do it. Watts gave me and other young wrestlers constructive criticism, but his arrogance rubbed a lot of people the wrong way - *"I'm gonna show you how to put a fanny every 14 inches in this place!'* he'd shout. He let everybody know he was *the* Bill Watts, and his born-again Christian testimonials to the wrestling magazines amused those who had seen him in action. Still, I accepted the fact he was my new boss, the Georgia *booker* I'd be working for and when I resumed wrestling, Watts plugged me back into Georgia's NWA circuit. Then, after a week or two, I started losing again - instructed by Watts to *do jobs* for guys I used to beat before I went to Australia. I followed instructions and did the *jobs* because I expected my scripts to pick up the way they'd been choreographed before I left. I was trying to follow Jack's advice to be patient, and since they didn't burn me right away with the *gebroney* role, I thought they'd soon put me back *on top.* Then, my losing became more frequent, just like Australia. After another couple of weeks passed, Watts booked me only three and four nights a week, not six. Something was up and I intended to find out what.

One night after a match in Macon, Georgia, Watts asked me to ride with him in his car back to Atlanta. I accepted, expecting the 85 miles to provide a chance to talk about how I was being used and learn his plans for my future. The NWA's wrestling turf war with Ann Gunkel was still raging, and I thought I could help Watts and the NWA win it. Watts was surprisingly friendly and hospitable; he had a cooler of beer in the back and a bag of joints under the front seat. He said, "Here, get us a couple of beers and roll us up a smoke." "OK, fine," I replied. I figured he was getting ready to do some serious talking about how I was being used and why, but it didn't happen. Instead, Watts spent most of our long car ride asking me questions, a kind of interrogation: he wanted to know *what happened* in Australia. I

measured my response carefully, only saying I was very disappointed in how I was used in Australia since I had the capabilities to be a top wrestler. I didn't know whether Watts knew about the Barnett incident, or whether he *did* know and was testing me to see if I'd talk about it; in any case, I said nothing about Barnett's proposition. As I'd told Jack, I said I'd refused to do a *blade job* in Australia and left early.

As we drove closer to Atlanta, I realized I didn't have much time to speak my piece and I told Watts that since I'd returned to Georgia, I wasn't being used well - I was losing too often and wasn't *booked* as often as I needed to take care of my family. I also told him something had changed, that before Ray Gunkel died, I'd been *pushed* on Atlanta TV and pitched as an up-and-coming contender and future champion. I told Watts I'd been paraded by Ray to home shows and boat shows, and when I came to Atlanta with the Rams to play the Falcons, I'd been introduced from the ring to keep my wrestling notoriety alive. I was tooting my own horn of course, but I figured if Bill Watts didn't know about my football background and prior history with Ray Gunkel, this was my chance to tell him. Watts seemed to agree, nodding over the steering wheel. And friendly: "Hey, have another beer," he said. It was about an hour drive and by the time we rolled into Atlanta, I realized I'd had done all the talking and his only purpose had been to feel me out about Australia and Barnett and what I was going to say about it. I hadn't taken the bait and instead tried to convince Watts that I needed *more* bookings in more main events to gradually progress toward getting the championship *strap.* And I told Watts I wasn't asking for anything other than what I'd been promised by Ray Gunkel. All that Watts said was, "Be patient, don't rush this thing, be patient Jim." I'd heard that line a few times before from the world's champion himself.

A few weeks later, after neither my match instructions nor bookings changed, I had another conversation with Watts that exploded into mutual screaming and pushing. I'd been told to do another *job* that night at a Columbus, Georgia show, and I did it. But by the time I walked from the ring back to the dressing room I was enraged. I smashed the steel doors open, spotted Watts and rushed him, screaming: "Bill, I thought we had an understanding about how I was going to be used!" Watts screamed back at me, "Jim, be patient, I'm trying to help you." "Well how the fuck are you trying to help me when I'm not wrestling full time and I'm starting to lose

again?" As Watts started to answer, I lunged toward the guy. Fat old Fred Ward was standing there in his black suit, little pinky ring and big cigar with a couple of other wrestlers just watching the beginning moves of a rare pro wrestling *shoot.* After a minute or so, all three jumped between us, separating Watts and me. As Watts was dragged off by his friends, he pleaded, "Jim, I'm doing it my way - I'm doing it my way, not your's."

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But my next week on Georgia's wrestling circuit was no different - few bookings and frequent instructions to do *jobs.* At that point, I stopped riding with other *babyfaces* and drove my own car to each night's show. I was miserable and moody, and needed time alone to think. I also needed to talk with Jack who was traveling around the country defending his new world championship title. Jack was now in a different city every night of the week and when I finally got him on the phone, I asked if he would set up a meeting with Watts, him and me as soon as possible. Jack knew it was important and I trusted him because he liked and respected me and could solve my problem with Watts. True to his word, Jack arranged a meeting a week or so later when Jack and Watts and old Paul Jones and Lester Fuller (Welch) agreed to hear me out. The four of us sat down in the old Georgia wrestling office on Chester Avenue in downtown Atlanta, and I was given another chance to have my say: first, I told them I wasn't wrestling often enough and needed more for my family than the $350 a week I was earning; I asked for $500 a week, guaranteed. Second, I told them they were *killing* me by having me lose all the time and said if they would push my football background and let me win, I could make all of us money. Third, I reminded them I could perform outside the ring on TV and at various public events such as boat and home shows, citing my prior involvement in these activities when Ray Gunkel was alive. And I emphasized that all I asked for was to be treated the same way Ray Gunkel used me: a *push*, winning *on top,* going for the belt and with money commensurate with my billing.

After I made my case, the room got real quiet. Old Paul Jones sat there stonefaced like he hadn't heard a thing I'd said, or knew what day it was. Lester Fuller (Welch) also looked dazed as usual and said nothing. But the

Tulsa Cowboy Bill Watts was predictably argumentative: “We don’t have anybody here on any kind of guarantee,” he snapped. “Are you trying to *blackmail* us because there’s another promotion in town?” As usual, Watts was off in his own airspace, pumping up his own balloon. My only support came from Jack Brisco when he said: *“This guy’s a million dollars worth of free publicity with his background and he should be used for business”* But Jack stopped there, not pushing his advocacy any further and I was surprised that my best friend in wrestling didn’t argue my cause with more enthusiasm. The meeting finally ended when Watts agreed to pay me $500 a week, which I asked for, and actually, I wasn’t expecting more than that from an industry whose labor relations were conducted without contracts or conscience.

Jack’s lukewarm support of my case during that pivotal meeting bothered me for weeks afterward. When he just sat there listening quietly but refusing to help me by advocating my position more persuasively, my heart had dropped. It was one of those moments of expected but failed support by a trusted companion that’s not forgotten, even all these years later.” I had obviously misjudged our friendship that began several years before Jack became world champion and continued through all those days and nights when we’d shared so much about our prior experiences and honest views about The Business. We’d also shared political and social opinion - Jack was a Native American, an American Indian who found my *northern* attitudes about nonwhites refreshingly different from the racist crap he’d encountered in and out of wrestling. And actually, there was nothing in our friendship that led me to expect Jack would leave me twisting in the wind during a time of trouble. But as I was learning, pro wrestling did funny things to people. Afterward, I convinced myself there were good reasons for Jack’s behavior at that meeting: although he was an owner of the Georgia promotion and NWA world champion, he didn’t control either group and was understandably more concerned about his own bookings and his assignment to win The Battle For Atlanta. Jack’s modest endorsement of my wrestling career may have stayed my execution for awhile.

Later that night after our meeting, both Jack and I wrestled on the weekly Friday show at Atlanta’s City Auditorium. Jack wrestled a main event championship match and I again worked *underneath.* Jack’s *payoff*

that night was $1,451.87 and I was paid $125 for wrestling somebody. A few days later, Watts told me, “Jim, were gonna do something special for you - a *football match* with Bobby Duncum!” And, Watts promised, Bobby would be *putting me over!* So Bobby and I had this goofy *football match* with helmets and pads in Atlanta one Friday night in September 1973 and it was a joke - one of those stupid wrestling *gimmicks* that makes you embarrassed to be part of it. I liked Bobby, who started wrestling about two years after I did after he’d played in the NFL for a season with the St. Louis Cardinals. He was about my size, having been a linebacker at West Texas State University and also was immediately *pushed* by wrestling promoters because of his legit athletic background. Our *Football Match* produced a sellout at the City Auditorium and it ended when I climbed up a pole and grabbed five 100 dollar bills as the winner. I had to give the $500 back to Watts, who paid me $150 that night and Bobby Duncum, I found out later, got $200 for losing to me.

The following week, my *payoff* was $515, but then they started to drop again in later weeks - to $290, $255, $195, $355, $225. In early November 1973, I wrestled on another big card in Atlanta where Jack again defended his world championship *strap*. That night, Jack got $1,250 for a match with Dory Funk, Jr. who was paid $800; for the same show, Watts paid himself $500 and $300 each to Bobby Shane, Tim Woods and Mr. Wrestling II and $200 to Robert Fuller, Bobby Duncum and Stan Vachon and Roberto Soto. Another seven wrestlers were given $150 and five more of us *underneath* guys got $125. Three guys were paid $50. By now, my weekly *payoff* was $245. A week later, I wrestled a *spot show* in Milledgeville, Georgia, a Macon satellite where matches were staged at the state hospital. That town, like some other Georgia hamlets, was *owned* by Fred Ward and his shaking son- in-law Ralph Freed who had spent too many years in the Army. Although Watts was the NWA’s Georgia *booker,* he didn’t bother to attend *spot shows* in small towns and one of Fred Ward’s lieutenants *called* the matches. That night, the task fell to Albert W.(Choo-Choo) Lynn, a former railroad worker and sometimes local wrestler.

Choo-Choo walked into the room where the *babyfaces* dressed and told me I would be *losing* to a little Latino wrestler about half my size. “Uh, I’m not going to lose,” I announced politely. Choo-Choo looked surprised and asked, “You’re what?” “I’m not going to lose,” I said again. And Choo-

Choo, becoming angry with this University of Georgia All-American's challenge to the authority of a village bigshot, spit out the inevitable threat - *"Well, if you don't, you just retired!"* "We'll see about that. I ain't retiring from nothun'! Look, tell the referee I'll do a *broadway* or a *double DQ*, but I'm not losing," I snapped. The Milledgeville referee was necessarily involved in prematch discussions because it was impossible for *heels* and *babyfaces* to share a dressing room in a small building, and so the referee was running back and forth between the two dressing rooms, trying to work out an agreement between us. Meanwhile, other *babyfaces* were listening to this argument and watching in disbelief - they didn't know my recent history with these guys, but they understood that *nobody refused to lose*. Finally, the little Mexican and I agreed to do a *broadway,* the usual compromise. After the match, Choo-Choo Lynn approached me in the dressing room as I was changing clothes. Standing next to me as tall as he could, this little man fumed, "You just retired - you know that, don't you!" he croaked. Looking down at this small bigshot, I snapped, "I ain't retiring from nothun'!" After I dressed, I stomped out of the building.

My next week's bookings included a match in Columbus, Georgia, another Fred Ward town. The night of that match, Fred was in a particularly inhospitable mood and when he saw me in the dressing room, he lifted the big cigar from his mouth to say something important: "You'll never wrestle for me again! *This is your last night in the wrestling business!"* And Big Fred was right. I lost again that November night in 1973, and I never wrestled again for the National Wrestling Alliance.

Later that month, Jim Barnett moved into two luxury condominiums at Colony Square in downtown Atlanta. His boyfriend Jason helped him select furniture. I learned later Barnett had been on the Georgia promotion's payroll since late September of 1973 – about the time my matches and *payoffs* took a nosedive. By now, Barnett had acquired substantial stock in both the Florida and Georgia NWA promotions - he bought 20% of Eddie Graham's Tampa operation and got 38% of the NWA's Atlanta office. After learning Barnett was back in Atlanta, I called him to talk about getting back

into wrestling. He was polite but said he didn't have time for me. "Jim, I'm too busy right now to talk with you. I'm going over to the Governor's Mansion to see Jimmy Carter," Barnett said. Holy shit, I couldn't believe it. Barnett had been a resident of Atlanta a few days and he was already calling on the Governor and future President. Of course, he'd told me that his speciality was *kings, prime ministers and dictators.*

I waited a few weeks, and called him again. On that occasion, Barnett agreed to talk but when I asked for work he said, "Jim, my boy, Fred [Ward] owns most of the Georgia territory and you have *heat* with Fred. *You can't work'.'* At that point, I finally understood the entire situation for what it really was: homosexual blackmail and *blackball.* Looking back, it had taken me awhile before I reluctantly accepted the truth: *because I refused to go to bed with one of wrestling's major promoters, I was kicked out of The Business.* Even after I understood the situation for what it was, I still couldn't talk about it, even to my closest confidants. I was too humiliated to admit that not only was I working in a phoney business, but that in order to advance in it, you had to go to bed with one of its officers, an old man who has having trouble getting lovers. The first person I revealed my problem to was Jason, the former basketball player and Barnett's playmate. When I told him the whole story over beer one night, he looked at me, expressionless, and said, *"Jim., why wouldn't you go to bed with him?"* He and I just didn't understand each other on this particular topic, although we had so much else in common. And although he was seeing Barnett again and helping decorate the Colony Square condominiums, I did not ask Jason's help by intervening on my behalf. I figured I could handle this problem, myself.

A little later, I finally told Nita the *entire* Australia story. By this time, Nita had become a lot less enthusiastic about my wrestling career, especially when my bookings dried up and she put it to me pretty forcefully one night: she wanted to know how I planned to feed the family now that I wasn't wrestling. So I revealed my darkest secret; Nita's only reaction was to say, "That's sick." I told Nita that although my wrestling days with the National Wrestling Alliance were over, I could wrestle for Ann Gunkel's independent promotion and also continue my career in Georgia real estate. Nita remembered Ann Gunkel from Ann's entertaining appearance on the TV show *What's My Line,* and seemed to approve of my plans. And I just

hugged my kids because there was no point to try to explain any of this to them; they were far too young to understand or sympathize.

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The parallels between what happened to me in 1973 and the WWF's sex scandals in 1992 are striking (as discussed in a later chapter). But there are differences, too. For one thing, sexual harassment allegations were not often taken to court in those days, especially homosexual harassment. For another, the media didn't pay much attention to pro wrestling in the 1970s, especially stuff that happened outside the ring. Nonetheless, lawsuits were filed over my treatment by The Business and they focused on my *blacklisting* by the NWA's wrestling monopoly. At the time, I didn't understand much about legal procedure or the evidentiary requirements for presenting my case but I had enough intuitive understanding of American justice to know I'd been wronged and needed an attorney to prove it.

So I turned my problems with the wrestling business over to young, aggressive Atlanta attorney Nick Lotito, who was impressed with the seriousness of my claims and the outrageous labor practices of NWA promoters. Nick and I spent a lot of time together, going over the factual details of my blacklisting, and I provided the names and dates he requested. Even so, Nick warned that my case might be difficult to prove in court because there was probably no trail of paper that could document it and the main evidence for my claim was likely to be my word against others. Not a good situation, Nick said. To help Nick in his search for corroborating witnesses, I turned over phone numbers of NWA promoters and bookers. Nick went to work, making dozens of inquiries to NWA-affiliated persons. All but one refused to answer Nick's questions about my blacklisting, but he struck gold when he called the San Francisco area code and talked with Roy Shire.

When Nick told me Roy Shire was willing to testify on my behalf, I was very surprised. I had never met Shire, and the only reason Nick contacted him was because he had recently been on the NWA's board of directors. When Nick asked me what I knew about Shire, all I could tell him was that Roy had been in The Business for 31 years, first as a wrestler and

later as NWA promoter in San Francisco and smaller cities in northern California. At the time Nick contacted him, Roy was enjoying his first few months of retirement at his 1,100 acre ranch near Sebastopol in northern California where he raised Hereford cattle. By then, Roy was a 58-year old multimillionaire with lucrative property investments in Fair Oaks and south Sacramento. When Nick and other lawyers convened a deposition at a Santa Rosa law office in September 1985, Roy was wearing $600 alligator cowboy boots and ready to talk *under oath* about the National Wrestling Alliance, my blacklisting and Jim Barnett's well known lifestyle.

Roy Shire confirmed the NWA's internal message that "nobody should use Jim Wilson " was transmitted in phone conversations between NWA promoters. Shire said he was told by NWA Los Angeles promoter Mike LeBell that Jim Wilson "was a troublemaker and he refused to lose and nobody should use him." When Shire was asked why I was considered a troublemaker, he testified: "He [Wilson] refused to lose. Because he was a local boy and he would look bad, being a big macho-type football player, and then I think he was complaining about some payoffs promoters were paying to him.. Payoffs. He figured he was getting cheated on his money"

Shire said he had pursued more information about my blacklisting at the NWA's annual convention in August 1974 at the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas. "I followed up by asking Jim Barnett. I went up to him, and Barnett and I were friends for years, and we talked and I came up and said, 'Jim, what's this with your professional football player that you had working for you?' And Barnett had a saying - 'Oh, what a boor!' And when he said that, everybody used to laugh, but that was when he was disgusted with anything. And that's the first thing that came out of his mouth - 'Oh, what a boor!' And I said, 'Jim, what about this boor? Was he OK?' And he [Barnett] proceeded to tell me *the guy* [Wilson] *refused to lose and that he was a troublemaker"*

Shire continued: "And I said, 'Did he give you all that kind of trouble?' And he [Barnett] said, 'Yes, he did.' And I said, 'Well, why? Here is new guy that comes into The Business and he seems to have a great potential . . . It was great potential for the guy [Barnett] - you know, if I had him, man - whew - could I make a fortune on the guy! And, then, you know, [I thought] 'You should be utilizing this guy a little better' . . . you see, what this guy [Wilson] had going for him was he came out of, you

know, Georgia as an All-American, and how many times do you have an All-American coming into wrestling? Not too many. And [Barnett] said, 'Well, refusing to lose because of being a local guy,' and he went through the whole thing with me, you know. And I said, 'Well, do you think this guy would be that way at other places, too?' He [Barnett] said, 'Yes, I do, I really think so.' So, I just logged him [Wilson] in the back of my mind so if Wilson ever called me, forget about it. I wouldn't use him," Shire said.

Shire added: "I probably discussed it with other promoters . . . it was an item of big magnitude in our business because we don't run into that type of thing too often - somebody refusing to lose. Or, troublemaker. Most of the wrestlers in The Business are pretty good boys, to tell you the truth, because they know that they can't beat the promoters. He's got you by the hamstrings, as we [don't] usually say - I could use another word, but this is a nice one. And consequently, if he is a lot of trouble, he knows that nobody is going to use him. So, most of the boys, if they've got any brains at all, go along with that, you know."

Shire also testified, "There was a rumor going around that Wilson tried to get into Florida with Eddie Graham and Barnett blocked it by calling Graham . . . telling Graham not to use him and Barnett owned part of Florida, as you well know . . . he [Wilson] wanted to go wrestle there and Eddie wouldn't use him because of the so-called deal, that he was hard to get along with and refuses to lose." Shire was asked who in the NWA had talked about my blacklisting, and he testified, "Everybody in The Business. The promoters. At the convention. Over the phone. Anytime, anybody does anything in Our Business that was detrimental to The Business, everybody would talk about it . . . and *because he was an All-American out of Georgia, it was one of those things that stuck in your mind a lot better than just the average boy because of his background . . . It was a talked about item because of the magnitude the guy held"*

Still under oath, Shire was asked if I had called him to discuss my situation or ask his help, and Shire replied, "No, no. Jim Wilson didn't call me. I heard - let's put it this way - I heard a rumor but I didn't know whether to believe it or not."

Attorney: "You heard a rumor about what?"

Shire: "You want me to tell you?"

Attorney: “Yes.”

Shire: “Okay. Well, let’s see if I can use it in such away that it doesn’t sound too vulgar.”

Attorney: “We are over 21.”

Shire: “Well, everybody knew, but nobody could prove, that Jim Barnett was a homosexual. Like he had guy named Lonnie [Winters] who lived with him a long time. Lonnie.”

Attorney: “This has something to do with Jim Wilson?”

Shire: “Well, yes. Jim Barnett was always discreet about his private life, and I think he had a right to be. But according to what I heard, Jim Barnett had a hard time getting somebody to go to bed with him. Now, all of this time that Jim Barnett had been in The Business, which was back into the late 1940s and early 1950s, Barnett had never approached a *boy* [wrestler] about going to bed with him. And I was kind of surprised when I heard this - that he had tried to get Mr. Wilson into bed with him - because he had never done it before. He never mixed his sexual life with business.”

Attorney: “So, you heard sometime between 1977 and 1979 that Jim Barnett made homosexual advances to Jim Wilson?”

Shire: “Right, and he refused.”

Attorney: “Wilson turned him down and for that reason, Barnett was angry with him?”

Shire: “Right. And then, to continue the rumor, one of the wrestlers who Jim Barnett *had* propositioned sexually and the *boy* went along with it, and Jim [Barnett] made him a lot of money and he was a blonde wrestler and I can’t think of his name, either, but he was a blonde, and if I heard his name again, I would remember it . . . this kind of shocked me because I never thought Jim Barnett would, you know, incorporate sex into a business deal.”

On this point, Shire was pressed for detail: “Do you remember who the wrestler was?” Shire replied, “Richy, a blonde wrestler.” “Is that a first name or last name?” Shire was asked. “I think it is the last . . . somebody Richy,” Shire testified (the blonde wrestler whose name Shire could not recall during his testimony probably is Tommy “Wildfire” Rich., whose inexplicable but brief ascension to the NWA’s world championship title -

which Barnett controlled as the champion's booker - in Georgia in 1981 was talked about at length inside The Business).

Attorney: "Did you at any time have any discussions with anybody regarding Barnett's alleged homosexuality?"

Shire: "Oh, yes. We laughed about it, you know. We were all - we were able to accept the fact that we thought that he was a homosexual but we could accept that because Jim [Barnett] was a very likeable guy. He had a good brain in The Business. Not in [booking] *finishes,* but on the TV. He could get on TV where a lot of guys couldn't get it. We felt he was an asset."

Still under oath, Shire continued, " *You know, that is one reason he* [Barnett] *never became president of the National Wrestling Alliance. We all felt it would be bad for our image for a homosexual to be president,* although he did such a fantastic job, he would have made a great [NWA] president. Believe me, he would have, but we figured to pacify him because he always liked to be a leader, so we made him [NWA] secretary . . . made him where he is up on the podium and he was in the limelight. Jim [Barnett] liked that. He just loved being in the limelight. So that's the reason his name was never brought up for the *boys* to vote on him, for him to be president . . . *How can you., in this business, you know?... Most of the guys in our business promotions are macho guys, ex-wrestlers or guys because of The Business have to side with the macho image, you know?'*

Then Shire blurted out his own conclusion: "When I talked to Jim [Barnett] about the football player. . . and [Barnett] told me he was a boor and refused to lose and was a troublemaker, I believed Jim [Barnett] at the time, okay, but then when I heard the story later about the sexual deal, then automatically my mind - that is, probably the reason that Jim Barnett had the trouble with the guy [Wilson]. The guy refused, and that made Barnett mad. And Barnett was being vindictive, you know, trying to get even with him for [not] doing what Barnett thought he should have done, you know"

Attorney: "Other than Barnett, do you know of anyone [else] who blacklisted Wilson?"

Shire: "The only incident I really know fairly positive is the [Eddie] Graham deal where he was supposed to go there but I don't know of any

other parts in the country where he tried to get in and Barnett called and [said] no."

Attorney: "Do you know whether the Graham deal, as you put it, was related to a homosexual issue, if you will?"

Shire: "This is what I heard, yes."

Shire was asked if a wrestler who refused to go to bed with a promoter would be a reason for not hiring or booking him, and Shire replied: "No, no, if he [Wilson] refused to go to bed with Barnett, I think I would have patted him on the back. If you want the truth, I don't believe that anybody has the right to put a sexual preference on somebody in this business. This macho-type wrestling. I object to that and that and that's the damned only reason that I'm here - otherwise I would flake out of this [case]."

Finally, Shire was asked, "In your opinion both as a wrestler and promoter, was Jim Wilson blacklisted?" Shire replied, "Yes, I would have to say so."

After Roy Shire's stunning revelations, NWA lawyers looked troubled. By contrast, my attorney Nick Lotito was a happy man and predicted that Shire's sworn testimony just won my lawsuit (described in more detail in a later chapter).

Unable to get work with NWA promoters in Georgia or Florida or anywhere else, I thought more seriously about going to work for one of its few competitors. In the southeast, that meant Ann Gunkel's independent promotion which was now struggling. A year before, Ann had offered me $750 a week; now her offer was $500. And Ann's crowds were down because she had lost wrestlers due to the NWA's rough tactics. But before I made my decision to work for NWA *opposition*, I talked with two wrestler friends in the NWA - Jack Brisco and Tim Woods. I didn't tell them about my problem with Barnett in Australia, but got them together one night to talk about our real estate syndicate I'd established earlier. Then I changed the subject, saying I was thinking about going to work for Ann but was

interested in their advice, their thoughts. Tim responded first: “You’re making a big mistake - let things cool off for a while,” he said. But my best friend in wrestling and the NWA’s world heavyweight wrestling champion was more direct: *“Jim, shut up and lay low. And don’t be so pushy,”* Jack said.

Although I had solicited their advice, both offered opinions that angered me. I realized they could not have understood the depth of my frustration because I still couldn’t tell them about the homosexual blackmail. Nor could they understand my sense of financial desperation when I snapped, *“Well how long am I supposed to wait - I’ve got five kids to feed?”*

Chapter 6

T H E B A T T L E F O R A T L A N T A

BY THE TIME I was blacklisted in October 1973, The Battle For Atlanta had been raging for 15 months. It started the day after Ray Gunkel's body was lowered into Arlington Memorial Cemetery in north Atlanta, about eight months before I went to Australia. Coincidentally, I had been a witness to a fateful meeting in late 1972 when a group of NWA promoters designed the conspiracy to eliminate Ray Gunkel's widow from The Business. It is a revealing story that shows the wrestling industry's real mayhem outside the ring, and I want to backtrack a little to tell it.

By now, I had been inside The Business long enough to learn that pro wrestling's only contests are fought between promoters, not wrestlers. The profits to be made in wrestling promotion are so enormous that promoters will do about anything to eliminate competitors. And after many years of experience with promotional competition - *opposition* - the wrestling promoters who survived became proficient not at producing a better product, but rather at *killing* off *outlaw* promotions by gangland tactics. Establishing promotional dominion often involved mean and nasty business methods that the law regards as anti-competitive restraints on trade. Although the promotional squabble over the lucrative Georgia territory in 1973 and 1974 was a territorial turf war that centered on control of the Georgia territory, the combatants were scattered across the United states, Canada, Mexico, Japan and Australia. The Battle For Atlanta was no mere dispute about distributing Ray Gunkel's wealthy estate, as the young widow Ann Gunkel soon learned. The Battle For Atlanta became the dirtiest and bloodiest wrestling war since the classic wrestling trust- busting battles of the 1920s and 1950s. And, ultimately, it led to lawsuits, including

disinterment of the U.S. Justice Department's long forgotten antitrust investigation and court judgment against the National Wrestling Alliance in 1956.

This is when I learned the wrestling business had an organizational history much like organized crime's. In wrestling, as in the mob, the death of a syndicate boss was a relatively rare opportunity for other family members to repossess or redistribute a large chunk of the action, and turf wars broke out. The significance of this, as Roy Shire said after leaving The Business, was *"any promoter in the country with a territory is a millionaire."*

I had met Ann Gunkel during my first year in The Business when I was being trained by her husband. She and Ray had been married for seven or eight years, having met in Las Vegas where she was in the hotel business. Legend had it that she'd been a model, and I didn't doubt it because she was very attractive and charming. She was always around at the matches, handling publicity and anything else Ray asked her to do. I think she and Ray regarded the promotion as a family business, and she wanted to be involved. And she was employed by the promotion in the office, where she handled arrangements for ticket sales, helped select talent and authorized repair work on properties owned by the promotion. Even in those years, Ray's cut of the profits earned him about $400,000 a year. When he died suddenly, his former partners seized the opportunity to redistribute the wealth.

A few days after Ray's funeral, which was attended by most of the NWA's movers and shakers in route to their annual convention in Las Vegas, Lester and Buddy Fuller (Welch) traded stock, and Lester flew up to Georgia in his little four-seater airplane. He took over Ray's old desk in the Chester Avenue offices, conducting business as usual. When Ann returned to the office to resume her duties, Lester told her he'd be taking over the promotion and asked her not to return. Lester said he and Paul Jones had dissolved Ray's old wrestling company, ABC Booking, transferring its assets to a new company organized as Mid- South Sports, Inc. The next day,

locks were changed at the Chester Avenue offices, blocking Ann's entry and access to files and records and later the same day, Ann asked her attorneys to incorporate Gunkel Enterprises to operate her new Georgia wrestling promotion, All-South Wrestling Alliance. When Ann started her promotion, nobody gave her a remote chance to make it, but she surprised a lot of people, especially Ray's old NWA friends and promoters.

The Battle For Atlanta began officially on November 20, 1972 when Ann attacked the old NWA promotion with three devastating raids. First, she secretly persuaded Tom Renesto, Ray's *booker* who wrestled as the masked Assassin, to join her. Then, together, they quietly hired away 25 wrestlers, two referees, one office manager who doubled as ring announcer and TV announcer Ed Capral from Jones and Lester Fuller (Welch) who were left with only two wrestlers. When the wrestlers gave their collective notice of resignation, Lester threatened them with blacklisting "all over the world" if they worked for Ann and said his old friends in the NWA would send him additional talent.

Ann's second move was to persuade local promoters in six Georgia cities to cancel their booking deals with the NWA group and work with her. Welch and Jones were stunned when they learned their local promoters in Augusta, Athens, Carrollton, Statesboro, Savannah and Waycross had dropped them for Ann's All-South Wrestling Alliance. Ann's third move was to establish her new promotion on television. About a year before Ray died, one of her old highschool chums had leaned on her to encourage Ray to switch the Georgia TV wrestling show from the ABC-TV affiliate in Atlanta to a small, independent UHF station with bad reception. Ann's old friend, Robert Edward (Ted) Turner III, offered Ray a better deal to put the wrestling show on his little WTCG-TV, Channel 17. Now that Ann had started her own promotion, she went back to Ted Turner to ask a return favor: she wanted him to carry her promotion and to drop the NWA program; Turner agreed and notified the NWA group his WTCG-TV would no longer carry their wrestling show.

Georgia's wrestling fans learned something was up later that week when the NWA wrestling program aired as usual but opened with an explosion when announcer Ed Capral introduced his guest commentator, the masked Assassin. Unexpectedly, the Assassin launched into a retirement speech, thanking his family and friends for their support during his 14 year

career and announced he would no longer wrestle with the mask. At which point he unlaced his hood, removed it, and Tom Renesto quickly walked off the set.

Four nights after the wrestler walkout and loss of local promoter and television contracts, Jack Brisco called me again from Tampa. He hadn't yet moved to Atlanta and said he and Eddie Graham were flying to Atlanta to import new talent and reminded me it was an important week in the life of the old Atlanta promotion because of its annual Thanksgiving show, traditionally the most lucrative show of the year. Jack asked if I could pick him up at the airport, which I was happy to do. This was about a year before my blacklisting, when I was still in good stead with the NWA. But I think Jack may have been concerned that I also might jump from the NWA to Ann's promotion because he said I would be rewarded for staying with the NWA. "Jim, this is a golden opportunity for you to make a big name for yourself in Georgia and the NWA," he said. I told Jack I had no intention of going with Ann Gunkel, and to count me in. I intended to stay with the NWA group out of loyalty because I had yet to cash in on those promises made by Ray Gunkel. As I saw it, only the NWA - not Ray's 35 year- old widow - could deliver on Ray's future plans for me. And Lester Fuller had reiterated Ray's promise that I was in line for both the *strap* and top money.

At the airport, Jack got off the plane with Bearcat Wright, the legendary black wrestling star from the late 1950s and early 1960s who was now winding down his career working as a manager in the Florida promotion. Jack asked me to drive them directly to Ray's old wrestling office at 310 Chester Avenue downtown, and I followed Jack and Bearcat into the office that was now used by Ray's NWA successors, Paul Jones and Lester Fuller (Welch). Inside, Jones and Lester and Eddie Graham were all on the telephones. Also present were Buddy Fuller (Welch) and Les Wolfe and Lester's sons Jackie Lee Welch and Roy Lee Welch, listening to the guys on the phones who were doing a lot of cussing. It was immediately apparent an important conference call was being held between Jones, Lester and Graham who were speaking long-distance with five other guys called Sam,

Fritz, Mike, Vince and LeRoy. As I listened, I concluded the guys at the other end of this telephone conference were NWA boss Sam Muchnick, Los Angeles promoter Mike LeBell, northeastern promoter Vince McMahon, Sr., Dallas promoter Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) and Tulsa promoter LeRoy McGuirk. There may have been others, too. As the conference call continued, I joined Jack and Bearcat in just sitting down and listening to the Atlanta end of the conversation that involved a long discussion about *blocking* Ann Gunkel. And that's all these guys were talking about - *blocking* Ann Gunkel.

Among the guys on the phones, Eddie Graham did most of the talking. Although no longer so naive about The Business, I was stunned by what I heard. That term *blocking* was new to me but I got the drift - it had to do with making deals with TV stations to keep Ann off TV and it involved tying up buildings where she promoted with exclusive contracts and it meant cutting off Ann's supply of wrestlers by refusing to rotate them to other territories; it also had to do with notifying INS about illegal work visas for noncitizen wrestlers and putting somebody inside Ann's promotion to collect intelligence and sabotage her operation. But what surprised me most was not the dirty tricks and probably illegal tactics discussed, but how well prepared the guys on the phones were to deal with *opposition.* It was pretty obvious they'd been together in these situations before and shared a view about how a promotional competitor should be handled and ultimately eliminated.

Before the conference call ended, Jack asked me to drive him to the White House Motor Inn where he was staying. At that time, I'd taken a brief leave from wrestling to study for another real estate exam but when Jack asked if I'd be at the NWA's Atlanta wrestling show that night, I said, "Sure, maybe we can go out afterward." That evening, despite the substantial defection of wrestlers, Jones and Lester put on a full card - Jack beat Hiro Matsuda in one match, and Jake "Grizzly" Smith won a 16-man Battle Royal against Bronco Lubich, Jim Grabmire, Tony Russo, Geeto Mongol, Robert and Buddy Fuller, Eddie Graham, Bob Armstrong, Mike Paidousis, Don Curtis, Ron Hill, Darrell Cochran, Tinker Todd and Doug "The Pro" Gilbert. The same night, Ann ran a show at the Ogelthorpe College gymnasium on Peachtree Road with 14 wrestlers who were about to be *blacklisted* if they weren't already - Ox Baker, Argentine Apollo, Tommy Seigler, El Mongol,

Jerry Brown, Buddy Roberts, Tom Renesto, Dick Steinborn, Rock Hunter, Tim Geohagen, Jesse James, Scandor Akbar, Oki Shikina and Mark Starr; two women wrestlers, Vicki Williams and Donna Christantello, also performed. It was the first night of many months of predatory promoting in The Battle For Atlanta where the warring factions went head-to-head, splitting the market. Later on, the NWA group staged two shows a week in Atlanta, one on the traditional Friday night and another four nights later to run opposite Ann's show. The NWA group even slashed its general admission ticket prices from $4.00 to $2.00 and admitted kids free. These and other more hardball tactics were used repeatedly for many months.

The NWA's most effective weapon against Ann Gunkel was controlling her access to wrestlers. Ann already knew this, which is why she had applied for NWA membership shortly after starting her promotion. But when her application arrived at NWA headquarters in St. Louis, NWA boss Sam Muchnick told her it couldn't be considered seriously; when she asked why not, Muchnick said the NWA couldn't have two promotions in the same area. There was another problem, too, Muchnick told Ann - Eddie Graham was sponsoring the next world champion Jack Brisco, and Graham wouldn't permit Jack to wrestle in matches she promoted. Desperate for wrestlers, Ann contacted other NWA promoters around the country. When she asked Big Jim Crockett if he would send her wrestlers, he said he couldn't antagonize Lester Fuller (Welch). When Ann called The Sheik (Detroit promoter Eddie Farhat), he also refused to cooperate; when Ann contacted Nick Gulas, who promoted in Tennessee and parts of Alabama and Mississippi, he told Ann he couldn't anger Lester or Eddie Graham; the Dallas promoter Fritz von Erich told Ann he didn't have any wrestlers available, and Gene Kiniski, NWA promoter in Washington state and British Columbia, said he could neither give nor take wrestlers from Ann since he'd just been invited to wrestle in Atlanta on a predatory show.

When Ann contacted LeRoy McGuirk, the Oklahoma promoter and partner of Bill Watts, McGuirk laughed at her request for wrestlers since Watts now owned stock in the NWA's Georgia promotion; Canadian

promoter Johnny Rougeau told Ann he had no wrestlers available and Jules Strongbow, *booker* for Mike LeBell's promotion in Los Angeles, said he could not help. When Ann called Wilbur Snyder, one of Ray's old friends who operated a so-called *independent* Indianapolis promotion with Dick The Bruiser (Richard Afflis), Snyder said Muchnick had asked them not to supply her with wrestlers. Ann also contacted Nick Bockwinkel, another of Ray's old friends who wrestled for Verne Gagne's so-called *independent* American Wrestling Alliance in the upper Midwest; Bockwinkel told Ann he wanted to help but had been *leaned on* by Gagne not to wrestle for her. So Ann called Gagne for his approval to let Bockwinkel or other wrestlers work for her but Gagne said he'd just spent a week on Eddie Graham's yacht in Tampa Bay and Graham told him not to give Ann wrestlers because "other wrestlers would *get ideas"* Gagne also told Ann that if he supplied her with talent, he wouldn't have any place for his wrestlers to go when they *burned out* in his territory. Finally, Ann called Amarillo promoter Dory Funk, Sr., father of Dory Funk, Jr. and Terry Funk, and a powerful figure in wrestling (which is why both his sons became world champions). When Ann asked to book Dory, Jr (then NWA world champion) old man Funk said there was *too much heat* about helping her, most of which was coming from Fritz von Erich; Funk told Ann that von Erich " *wanted something done about Ann Gunkel."*

The only wrestlers Ann could get were a few guys who had worked for Ray and felt loyal, and were willing to risk *blacklisting.* Later, an extensive investigation by Ann's lawyers showed the NWA *blacklisted* - or threatened to blacklist - at least 19 of them: Puerto Rican wrestler *Roberto Soto* left Ann's promotion after Vince McMahon Sr. threatened to cancel a work permit for Soto's brother who worked for McMahon; wrestlers *Jerry Brown* and *Buddy Roberts* (Dale Hey) left Ann's promotion after LeRoy McGuirk and Bill Watts offered to double their pay if they came to Tulsa (court documents show both wrestlers were paid a *subsidy* of $1,196); *Ox Baker, Wayne Cowan* and *Guillotine Gordon* were stopped on a car trip to Savannah by Leo Garibaldi who told them they were *through everywhere in the country* if they continued to wrestle for Ann Gunkel(Garibaldi told Baker " *Gunkel is going under'* and he would be *blackballed* in Florida, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas City if he continued working for Ann); wrestler *Scandor Akbar* (Jim Wehba) was threatened by LeRoy McGuirk, Fritz von Erich and Little Rock promoter Jimmy Lotts (who told

Akbar to leave Ann Gunkel or be *blackballed* by the NWA); wrestler *Ernie Ladd* was threatened by Bill Watts to stay away from Ann Gunkel or he would be *blackballed* by the NWA (when Ladd still worked for Ann, Fritz von Erich told Larry Hamilton *something had to be done about Houston promoter Paul Boesch* who booked Ladd in other wrestling territories); after the *Masked Marvel* (Jerry Usher) taped a wrestling show for Ann at Ted Turner's WTCG-TV, Tulsa's LeRoy McGuirk telephoned Usher to say he had *better get out of town* and Usher left immediately; when *Jose Lothario* was about to leave Texas to wrestle for Ann, Eddie Graham threatened to expose Jose's *paternity problem.*. And NWA boss Sam Muchnick told Dick The Bruiser to stop *Cowboy Bob Ellis* from wrestling for Ann Gunkel.

There was more: *Ron Prichard*, one of Ann's Georgia champions, was confronted by Jack Brisco at the Dallas airport and told to stop wrestling for her; *Larry Hamilton* was offered stock in the NWA's Georgia group if he would leave Ann Gunkel; *Tommy Seigler* was told by Lester Fuller, " *You won't be able to wrestle for anybody else"* if he worked for Ann; *The Gladiator* (Charles Sprott) was threatened with blacklisting by both Jack Brisco and Bill Watts after working with Ann's promotion (when Sprott continued to work for Ann, he was threatened by Jack in the parking lot outside Turner's WTCG in July 1973 and Eddie Graham later told Ann he "had *Brisco stop The Gladiatofy);"* wrestler *William Cobb* was threatened by Fred Ward, Albert (Choo- Choo) Lynn and Harley Race (now the NWA's world champion who told Cobb he *could get hurt bad working for the wrong side;* later, Lester Fuller (Welch) threatened Cobb with blacklisting and physical injury); wrestler *Bill Bowman* was told by Lester Fuller (Welch) to leave Ann's promotion; *Rock Hunter* (Robert Fink) was warned by Lester Fuller that his involvement with Ann Gunkel *would be remembered* (later, Hunter got harassing telephone calls from unidentified callers and he returned to the NWA's Georgia group, although he was punished by being booked once a week in Athens for $40 a night).

To *kill* Ann Gunkel's *outlaw* promotion, the NWA's manipulation of wrestler supply and demand was even more cynical - at the same time it cut off the availability of wrestlers to Ann by *blacklisting* or threats of blacklisting, it unleashed its own supply of star wrestlers to Ann's competitors, the NWA's Georgia guys - Paul Jones and Lester Fuller

(Welch). Among the NWA stars dispatched to Atlanta were NWA junior heavyweight champion Freddie Blassie, NWA light heavyweight champion Danny Hodge, Roy Shire's California champion Paul DeMarco and three other popular headliners - Dory Funk, Bill Watts and Fritz von Erich. During one week, the NWA booked former boxing champion Joe Louis (just four years before Louis' debilitating aortic aneurysm) to referee matches in three Georgia cities controlled by the NWA guys (Louis got $500 to referee the Atlanta show, about $300 more than light heavyweight champion Danny Hodge was paid that night to defend his belt).

Another NWA tactic in The Battle For Atlanta involved creating *no-shows* for Ann Gunkel's cards by inducing certain wrestlers whose appearances she had advertised to not appear. These manipulated *no- shows* (without advance notice to Ann or her *booker)* included Eduardo Carpentier, Andre The Giant, Paul DeMarco and Bearcat Brown and her most costly *no-show* was Bruno Sammartino who no-showed after weeks of publicity and hefty advance ticket sales; Ann refunded thousands of dollars to angry fans and learned later from Bruno that Vince McMahon, Sr. and Bill Watts somehow persuaded him to miss his plane from Pittsburgh to Atlanta.

The NWA also interfered with Ann's arena arrangements on Georgia's wrestling circuit. In Atlanta, Ann was told by local officials that the City Auditorium had an exclusive agreement with the NWA group (the Auditorium manager later confessed he was asked by Macon Coliseum manager Bill Lavery, an old friend of Eddie Graham, not to rent to Ann Gunkel). As for Atlanta's Omni Arena, Ann was told by Omni manager Tom Kuna that Lester Fuller (Welch) instructed him not to rent to her, that the Omni had a verbal agreement not to rent to any wrestling promotions other than the NWA's; later, when Ann complimented Kuna's new gold Rolex wristwatch, Kuna told her the watch was a gift from Jim Barnett.

In Macon, Lavery told Ann the Coliseum was already booked every day for the next two years and Macon's Mayor Ronny Thompson explained that Fred Ward and Ralph Freed opposed Ann's use of the building; an investigation later revealed that Lavery had told Macon's mayor "we *would*

never rent to Gunkel Enterprises under any circumstances" and that Lavery was paid to not only keep Ann out of Macon but lobby the arena managers at Savannah's Civic Center and at Atlanta's City Auditorium to refuse bookings for Ann Gunkel. In Savannah, arena manager Mike Finnacario was flown to Tampa for a weekend on Eddie Graham's yacht where Graham convinced him to not rent to Ann Gunkel. In Augusta, local NWA promoter Steve Manderson was threatened by Leo Garibaldi, Paul Jones and Eddie Graham to put him out of business if he booked with Ann Gunkel; to make sure he got the message, Manderson's car was trashed one night with broken eggs and slashed tires. In Columbus, Georgia, Ann was given several booking dates at the Columbus Auditorium until Fred Ward arranged for the Columbus City Council to enact an ordinance prohibiting any wrestling shows within 14 days before or after his shows. Ann encountered similar problems in securing dates at the Lakewood Arena, the Griffin-Barnesville Sports Palace, and the Jacksonville Arena in Florida.

The NWA also interfered with Ann's access to TV. In Atlanta, her old friend Ted Turner was caught in the middle of the warring factions; when Ann convinced Turner to cancel the NWA show and carry her's, an angry Paul Jones dispatched Buddy Fuller (Welch), Tom Smith and Eddie Graham to Turner's office, threatening a lawsuit. Turner decided to make money off both groups by agreeing to carry both shows - Ray Gunkel's old NWA Georgia promotion and his widow Ann's *outlaw* group. In Macon, WCWB-TV agreed to sell time to Ann but canceled the agreement a week later after Fred Ward threatened to remove his own wrestling show from the station and take it elsewhere; then WCWB- TV station manager W. J. Groome canceled Ann's show and kept Ward's, telling Ann that Ward was a friend. In North Carolina, Ann provided a wrestling program to Charlotte's WRET-TV (a Ted Turner station) for about nine months until her prime time slot was changed to late nights; her previous time slot was given to Eddie Graham's Florida wrestling show after Jim Crockett and Eddie Graham arranged for the changes.

At about this time, Jim Barnett moved to Atlanta from Australia and openly joined the wrestling turf war with Ann Gunkel, a fight whose tactics until now were masterminded by Eddie Graham. Now in control of the NWA's Georgia promotion, Barnett reincorporated it with a new name - Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc. Immediately afterward, Ann Gunkel was hit with three lawsuits, all of which had Barnett's fingerprints on them. In one, Ann's booker Tom Renesto was sued for a million dollars and accused of stealing records and documents and wrestlers from Ray's old promotion; another lawsuit accused Ann of stealing the assets of Ray's promotion. Both suits were ultimately dismissed, as was another filed by Fred Ward against wrestlers who left the NWA group to work for Ann.

While the lawsuits against Ann Gunkel were pending, Barnett moved quickly to further block Ann's access to arenas. In Athens, Georgia, Barnett threatened to build his own arena and stage predatory cards against local promoter Tip Almond who booked Ann's wrestlers; in Jacksonville, Florida, Barnett and Eddie Graham and Buddy Fuller persuaded the Jacksonville arena to sign a three-year exclusive contract with their NWA promotions; in Augusta, where both Ann and Barnett were asked to bid for a new arena contract, Barnett's bid was twice as large as Ann's because, Barnett said later, he was willing to lose money on the deal in order to get the building away from her. And in Atlanta, Omni Arena manager Tom Kuna admitted that Barnett gave him a gold Rolex watch to not book shows for Ann Gunkel. In between skirmishes in The Battle For Atlanta, Barnett found time to pick a fight with the NWA's Memphis promoter Nick Gulas, trying to muscle Gulas out of the territory Gulas thought he owned. Months earlier, Barnett squabbled over control of the NWA's Louisville promotion. Jim Barnett was a busy guy. And powerful. In later legal proceedings, Ronnie Garvin (Roger Barnes) testified: "I call him *the godfather of wrestling* because he's the man with the money and the troubleshooters. If there's a problem somewhere, he comes in and squashes it. He's been known [to do that] for years. He's done it many places and many times . . . I worked for him at the time he came in and bought Georgia . . . he bought them out because they had *opposition* there - *opposition* was Ann Gunkel, and he was about the only man that had the means of fighting her and get her out through talent and money and political connections. And everybody knew when he went into Georgia that - *it's a known fact in wrestling the man is a troubleshooter"*

NWA members held a secret meeting in Atlanta in early May 1973; the *official* purpose of the meeting was to approve new organizational bylaws but the meeting had only one agenda item - to solve *the Ann Gunkel problem.* Muchnick told members that 1973 was *"going down as the most difficult year in NWA history"* And Muchnick, more than anyone, knew its history well. During the meeting, Jim Barnett openly accused Dory Funk, Sr. of helping Ann Gunkel get wrestlers and later that day, Ann and Funk met secretly at the Atlanta airport. When Ann told Funk she wanted to use Lord Alfred Hayes, Funk said she couldn't use him because of pressure from Jim Barnett, Eddie Graham and Paul Jones. Funk told Ann the NWA would *blackball* anybody who wrestled for her but if she dropped her NWA membership application, she would be helped behind the scenes by both him and Houston promoter Paul Boesch. When NWA members met again three months later for their 1973 annual meeting at the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, NWA boss Muchnick read a telegram from Ann Gunkel in which she withdrew her application for NWA membership. Then, the 24 members adjourned to discuss *the Georgia problem* in the hallways and the men's room *off-the-record.*

One of the meeting's participants, San Francisco promoter Roy Shire, later testified in legal proceedings about those peculiar discussions in the halls and bathrooms. Shire said: "There was no discussion [of *blackballing* or territorial rights in the open meeting] because if you discussed them, they would go in the minutes. And if there were minutes, then if anybody ever came to you and threw a lawsuit against you, they would confiscate the minutes . . . so nothing was ever mentioned about *blackballing* or territorial rights. What you did was - it was very funny - if anybody wanted to discuss anything like that, we would get around the room very quietly and somebody would say, 'We would like to adjourn now for a cup of coffee' or 'for the restroom' or whatever. Then, everyone would get out in the hall and discuss it. *It wasn't on the minutes that way I'* Shire explained.

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By late 1973, I had been blacklisted by the NWA and was looking for wrestling work anywhere I could find it, even with Ann's *outlaw*

promotion. I had seen her weekly TV show and noticed my friend Thunderbolt Patterson was wrestling for her. I was surprised to see him with an *outlaw* promotion; obviously something had fallen apart with the NWA's Crockett promotion in Charlotte. In any event, Ann was lucky to get him because his popularity would be a shot in the arm for her struggle against the NWA's rough tactics. As expected, I learned later, it hadn't taken long for T-Bolt to electrify Georgia's wrestling fans and Ann had 13 sellouts at Atlanta's City Auditorium with T-Bolt in main events; she later joked that she could make money with him by going on the revival circuit, using T-Bolt as a Rev. Ike clone. "He is wonderful on the microphone - he about converted me, onetime," she laughed.

After seeing T-Bolt on Ann's TV show, I went down to the City Auditorium to find him one night in December 1973. As usual, T-Bolt was over in a corner of the locker room with a Bible in his lap. We greeted each other and talked briefly. He knew I wasn't wrestling, and asked about it. I gave him a quick summary of my blacklisting, and said I needed work. When I asked why he'd left the NWA, he said it was a long story that he'd tell me later. As we chatted, Ann's *booker* Tom Renesto surmised we were friends and invited me to go to work for them and suggested T-Bolt and I form a tag team. Renesto promised me main events, $500 a week and said they'd give me their promotion's Georgia championship strap. The money was less than the $750 a week they offered two years earlier in 1972, but I needed to find work. As usual, there was nothing in writing - no contract - but I returned to the ring in April 1974 for Ann's *outlaw* promotion - about three months after I'd been blacklisted by the NWA.

During my first week back wrestling, T-Bolt and I drove the circuit together and he told me what happened in Charlotte - they didn't want a *black* champion. Nor did Florida, where he'd had a NWA world title match with champion Harley Race in St. Petersburg in June of 1973 but wasn't permitted to win, of course. But after working for Ann for awhile, T-Bolt was genuinely happy about his new arrangement and said that because Ann Gunkel understood sexism in the NWA, she also understood racism. T-Bolt said Ann was treating him better than any promoter he had worked for since he entered The Business in 1965. He said he made more money working in Georgia's small towns than he ever earned in the NWA's Carolinas, Florida, California and Texas territories. T-Bolt was enthusiastic about the future of

Ann's promotion, saying that although she was largely naive about the nuts and bolts of the wrestling business, she was fair and decent with the wrestlers who were fed up with the NWA. T-Bolt's only reservations concerned Ann's *booker* - Tom Renesto. Although Renesto had been instrumental in orchestrating Ann's raid of NWA talent in Georgia, T- Bolt sensed Renesto shouldn't be trusted. I laughed and told the story about how angry Renesto got when Ray Gunkel told him to do a *job* for me early in my career. T-Bolt shook his head, saying, "We gotta watch this guy." For a black, ninth grade dropout from Waterloo, Iowa, T-Bolt was a perceptive observer, as I would learn later.

As a *babyface* tag team, T-Bolt and I were a hit. Somehow, we had a certain chemistry and I think T-Bolt was surprised at how well we *got over.* After a few matches, he said, "We've got a formula - here's a dumb nigger that complained and here's Jim, the guy they was grooming." And we drew money right from the start in the usual towns on the Georgia circuit - Columbus, Augusta, Savannah, Atlanta and on the Macon outskirts - although not in the usual buildings which the NWA had locked up. The crowds were down because the wrestling market was now split by two promotions. About half of my matches were tag team events with T-Bolt and about half were singles matches. Immediately, I was winning again. My first TV match for Ann at the Turner studios was a singles match and it involved an awkward incident with a very *green* wrestler who was just beginning his career. Jerry Blackwell was about five feet nine and 350 pounds, another one of wrestling's fat *heel* freaks. Despite his obesity, however, Blackwell was surprisingly agile, able to do drop kicks, for example, an unheard of maneuver for someone so heavy. That night, Renesto gave us our instructions: the match would end with me *going over* with my football tackle. When it was *time to go home,* I went into the lineman's three- point stance and charged at Blackwell's 350 pounds of flab. Apparently, Blackwell was not set for me because I knocked him out of the ring into the second row of ringside seats; he took a long time to get up and was counted out, and we both returned to the dressing room where I apologized sincerely and asked him if he was alright. He mumbled something, and waved me away. He was not hurt, but I felt bad that I had given him a *stiffer* introduction to pro wrestling than was necessary or intended.

Among the wrestlers working for Ann were the Pofffos - Angelo and son Lanny. One night in the Atlanta dressing room, Angelo walked over with another guy in tow. “Jim,” he said, “I’d like you to meet my other son Randy.” And I said hello to a pleasant and clean shaven 21 year-old who at six feet one and about 175 was certainly too small to ever be a pro wrestler. Angelo, however, was very proud of Randy. “He’s with the St. Louis Cardinals,” Angelo beamed. And Randy was paraded around and introduced to everyone in the dressing room. It was not just Angelo’s paternal pride, but the old struggle with legitimacy. Wrestling always wanted some of it to rub off. Actually, skinny Randy Poffo was a good athlete, like his father who attracted attention in 1945 when he set a world record for 6,033 consecutive sit-ups; following his dad, Randy did 1,015 sit-ups and 801 pushups as a seventh grader. After Randy batted .525 as a switch-hitter at Downers Grove High School near Chicago, he was signed by the Cardinals and played a few years of minor league baseball in Sarasota. After an injury, he was traded to the Reds who cut him and he entered pro wrestling in 1975. And Randy Poffo became one of wrestling’s hottest acts in 1985 - Macho Man Randy Savage, after spending ten years with *outlaw* promotions.

In spring 1974, Jim Barnett’s NWA partners launched an all-out attack on Ann Gunkel’s promotion by bringing its big name attractions from around the country to the Georgia circuit where they were showcased at Atlanta’s new Omni Arena. To ramp up Georgia Championship’s booking clout, Barnett had replaced Bill Watts as *booker* with Jerry Jarrett, whose Louisville Wrestling Enterprises promoted in Kentucky’s small towns. Jarrett brought *heel* manager Gary Hart, the three Garvin *brothers*, Jerry Lawler and Dick The Bruiser to the Omni for matches with the NWA’s Georgia standbys Tim Woods, Mr. Wrestling II and Ron Fuller. A few months later, Jarrett left Georgia Championship when he was offered half ownership in the Gulas-Welch promotion (that staged shows in Tennessee, Kentucky and parts of Indiana, Mississippi and Arkansas) and was replaced by Louie Tillet, the man with whom I had my first wrestling match in 1968.

At about this time, Barnett's Georgia Championship turned the tide in The Battle For Atlanta. On one Omni show in April 1974, Barnett drew the biggest Atlanta gate in the city's pro wrestling history with NWA champ Jack Brisco, Andre The Giant, Bobo Brazil and Dick The Bruiser. Of all the NWA stars who helped Georgia Championship turn the corner against Ann Gunkel, none was more important than my old friend Jack Brisco, whose world championship bookings were controlled by - Jim Barnett, now the most powerful figure in the NWA. Usually, the NWA's world champion toured the country, appearing in wrestling's major cities two or three times a year. But with the blessing of Jack's patron Eddie Graham, Barnett *booked* Jack for world championship matches in Atlanta almost monthly in 1974 - Jack wrestled on ten Atlanta shows, compared to four Atlanta appearances the year before. In addition to using Jack's *strap* status as a promotional battering ram, Barnett imported other NWA stars - Gene and Ole Anderson, Dusty Rhodes and The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) - for special appearances. With both Bill Watts and Mr. Wrestling II (Johnny Walker) still working main events, Georgia Championship had the hottest wrestling talent pool in the country.

Ann Gunkel's promotion couldn't compete with the NWA's lock on star performers, none of whom would leave the NWA to work for her; she joked openly that she was *"Queen of the Gebronies,"* but the truth was a lot less funny - her promotion finally started to feel the pinch. I could tell that by my diminishing *payoffs.* When my weekly *payoff* was $350 instead of $500, I went to see Renesto. "Tom, did I do something wrong?" I asked. "Of course not, man, what's the matter? What's the matter, brother?" he said. "Well, I didn't get my $500." Renesto insisted, "Look, business isn't too good - don't worry, we'll take care of you." After that brief conversation, I slumped into an office chair, looking a little grim-faced, I guess. A few minutes later, Ann walked by. "What's the matter, honey?" she asked. "Come on, baby, cheer up!" I liked Ann's perky optimism, but I suspected Ann didn't know what was going on with her promotion. She was really a *front,* with Tom Renesto running the day-to-day operation and she was totally dependent upon his judgment and integrity. But I suspected Renesto cared more about himself than anything else, as indicated by that fuss Renesto made years earlier in 1969 when Ray Gunkel asked him to do *a job* for me. After that day, T-Bolt and I were not used again as tag partners and in the following weeks, the troupe's wrestling assignments were

somehow peculiar. Renesto was not using Ann's wrestling talent to make sensible matches that drew crowds and he used bad *finishes* - bland pinfalls and repeated *DQs*. Then Renesto gave Ann's Georgia championship *strap* to Tom Prichard, former Cincinnati Bengals linebacker, "because he is still playing football and you're not," Renesto said.

Although T-Bolt and I were no longer wrestling on the same cards, we continued our close friendship and often talked about how Renesto was operating Ann's promotion. After awhile, we concluded Renesto was spreading Ann's talent so thinly that her shows could *not* possibly draw; meanwhile, Jim Barnett's Georgia Championship was rolling in promotional success. Connecting some dots, one of which was Renesto's off-hand remark to me that he "talked to Barnett every week" and his later admission that "I got my deal with Barnett in writing," T-Bolt and I concluded Tom Renesto - *was actually working for Barnett* and Ann didn't know it. Still naive about the kind of people in The Business, she was unknowingly on the road to financial ruin because of the NWA mole to whom she entrusted her booking. Maybe Renesto's sabotage of Ann's promotion was understandable in light of NWA Savannah promoter Aaron Newman's threat to kill him in December 1972 (later revealed by Ann's attorneys in court documents). By now, T-Bolt also had cooled in his enthusiasm for Ann Gunkel's treatment of wrestlers. He felt this way because after his 13 consecutive main events in Atlanta that produced sellouts for Ann, she had promised him a contract for 8% of the gates but he was still waiting for his signed contract - and his 8%. We finally concluded Renesto wasn't *being business* with either one of us.

About two months later, Ann and Renesto talked to T-Bolt about doing an Omni Arena show. They apparently realized they'd need to start promoting shows at the Omni in order to compete with Georgia Championship, and they knew a successful show at the huge Omni would require a lot of *butts in the seats*, as they say, and only T-Bolt could draw well from Atlanta's sizeable population of black wrestling fans. T-Bolt, the highschool dropout, tried to use his racial currency with Ann's promotional ambition to get his contract signed but she put him off. The more Renesto and Ann talked with T-Bolt about that Omni show, the more T-Bolt pressured Ann to sign the promised contract for 8% of the gate. And the more T-Bolt pushed for his contract, the more suspicious Renesto became of my involvement in T-

Bolt's demands to get everything in writing. Finally, Renesto told me, "Leave the nigger alone." Of course, the first person I told about Renesto's remark was Claude Patterson, who shrugged it off when another racial incident became more consequential.

At about this time, Ann Gunkel announced plans to expand her *outlaw* promotion further into NWA territory by moving into Crocketts' North Carolina. When T-Bolt learned about Ann's Carolina expansion, he asked her if he could co-promote some shows in the Charlotte area, a territory loaded with black Thunderbolt Patterson fans. T-Bolt's interest in co-promoting Charlotte was partly personal - his girlfriend Pansy and her family lived in North Carolina, and T-Bolt had wanted to establish a more permanent residence near them. But T-Bolt's offer was met with derision - Ann laughed in his face and snapped, "No!" But that brief episode affected T-Bolt in ways no one else could understand. With all his physical ailments, he realized he couldn't wrestle much longer and had no other job skills; he had no occupational alternatives to some role in The Business, and he knew it. Years earlier, he had asked Cowboy Luttrall, the Florida NWA promoter before Eddie Graham pushed him out, if he could buy stock in the Tampa promotion and Luttrall laughed, too. T-Bolt often told me, "I don't have much of an education, but I do know wrestling from top to bottom. I do know how to spell guys' names and I know how put them down, and I know how to *book.* But I ask for *booking* jobs, I ask for promotions and they laugh." T-Bolt also knew how much money he'd made for the people who laughed in his face. For T-Bolt, Ann Gunkel's laughter was another episode of humiliation.

Both T-Bolt and I quit Ann's promotion a few weeks later on a warm day in May 1974. T-Bolt had wrestled with Ann's *outlaw* promotion for six months and I'd been with her group for about eight or nine weeks, but we both felt we had finally taken enough of what The Business, mainstream or *outlaw,* had to offer. We'd worked for both the National Wrestling Alliance and one of its more promising *outlaws,* but we'd both been treated badly even though doing our jobs well - meeting bookings, taking *bumps* and putting *butts in the seats.*

When we quit Ann's promotion, we were angry and plotted a going- away present for Ann and Tom: at her next weekly Atlanta show at the City Auditorium, we waited outside until the house was full at about 8:30; after

the first match, we climbed into the ring and shouted a challenge to all the wrestlers on the card to wrestle us, then and now. We told the crowd if nobody came to the ring to wrestle us, the fans should demand their money back - refunds. Of course, none of Ann's wrestlers accepted our challenge. As we continued our impromptu taunting skit, Ann's security police figured we were part of the show and left us alone. About 20 minutes later, the City Auditorium was nearly empty and Ann's wrestling show was ruined on a night that cost her a lot of money. But walking away from Ann Gunkel's promotion was easy when T-Bolt and I formulated an alternative life in wrestling for both of us and other wrestlers, too: *we had already decided to organize our own promotion that treated wrestlers the way they should be treated.* It was a radical idea, then and now.

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I became aware of the wrestling industry's archaic labor relationships during my second year in wrestling, long before the incident in Australia with Jim Barnett or my blacklisting. Coming into wrestling after my NFL experience with the NFL Players' Association, it wasn't very long before I started talking with the *boys* about *wrestling's feudalism.* And I was outspoken about the industry's abuses in both the locker rooms and during those long car rides up and down Georgia's backroads. When I told other wrestlers they were not getting paid what they deserved and should have their agreements in writing, most of them listened; after Ray Gunkel's death, I told other wrestlers the industry should have medical plans and emergency medical equipment outside each arena show; after I discovered The Business had no pension program, I started my own wrestlers' retirement plan with a real estate syndicate organized specifically for this purpose but could get only four wrestlers to sign onto it. When I told the *boys* they needed a union - a pro wrestlers' labor association - they nodded in the affirmative but were scared to death of me, and when I asked why so few black guys were in pro wrestling or why they were required to perform racial stereotypes, some suspected I was a lurking subversive, perhaps a Communist. These are the reasons I became known inside The Business as a troublemaker who refused to bleed and refused to lose, but the truth is that

I was labeled a rebel because I asked too many impertinent questions; my problem in Australia with Jim Barnett had little to do with it, although that was the reason for my blacklisting.

I've never tried to convince anybody that I was the greatest athlete on the team or the smartest guy in the classroom, but I've always been willing to take a critical look at my environment. When I got into pro wrestling, I was probably the only wrestler in the country who also belonged to a labor union for athletes *and* knew something about it - from my involvement as a union coordinator for the Rams when the NFLPA became an effective force in pro football in 1968. And that's why I thought I knew the solutions to pro wrestling's labor problems, which were not that different from those in baseball and basketball before the emergence of the Major League Baseball Players' Association and the National Basketball Players' Association in the 1950s and the NHL Players' Association in 1967.

In time, reforming pro wrestling by organizing a wrestlers' union became my overriding mission; some say it escalated into an obsession and maybe it did. I knew it would be difficult and complicated, but I thought wrestling's reform ought to proceed in two steps: the first was to establish a promotional group that was financially successful and would treat wrestlers fairly with formal contracts that specified *payoffs* according to a percentage of the gate and much larger portions of the gates; the second step was for the established promotion to underwrite a wrestlers' union. What a radical, revolutionary plan for The Business! - an idea whose time was long overdue. And I was confident of its success because it was simply right. So the Battle For Atlanta enlarged in the summer of 1974 when a third wrestling promotion joined the fray. That July, Thunderbolt Patterson and I introduced our International Wrestling League. We knew it would be risky to launch a new business without much capital in a market now split three ways, but we were confident we could at least do as well as Ann Gunkel was doing.

The Battle For Atlanta continued. Although Jim Barnett's role as the brains behind Georgia Championship's strategy and tactics was hidden from public view, Barnett's backstage clout and lifestyle only made for more intimidating intrigue. The dark *godfather* imagery was amplified when

wrestlers talked quietly among themselves about his sleek limousine, chauffeured by a young, good looking black man, spotted cruising up and down Atlanta streets at night. Jim Barnett lived expensively and politically, and although I never doubted his love of money and men, I may have underestimated his obsessive pursuit of brute power. As anyone who knew him will affirm, Jim Barnett wanted more than anything to be czar of professional wrestling. By 1974, he was well on his way, having already come to terms with the fact that he would *never* become the *public* boss of the macho wrestling business in which *heels* may swish and lisp through a stereotyped pantomime of The Raging Queen but an obviously gay official would not be tolerated because that was regarded as offensive. What a crazy business!

By September 1974, Ann Gunkel's *opposition* promotion was in trouble. She was desperate for a large gate to avoid financial ruin, and her solution was to promote a match in New York with Carlos Colon, a popular Puerto Rican wrestler. But when Ann contacted the New York State Athletic Commission for a promoters' license, she was told by one commissioner that Vince McMahon Sr. was a personal friend and she was wasting her time. He declined to give her even an application form. Some said he was the best state wrestling commissioner that money can buy.

At about this time, T-Bolt and I launched our promotion, the International Wrestling League (IWL). I developed a business plan for promoting in Georgia based on what I knew about the probable annual revenue of Georgia Championship. My arithmetic showed Barnett was taking in between $3 and $3.5 million a year (later proved to be correct by Barnett's subpoenaed records). On the basis of those numbers and estimates of the portion of the market we could tap, I thought we could make money with T-Bolt's popularity in wrestling and my notoriety from football. I crafted a budget and a strategy for booking arenas, drafted wrestler contracts and registered a wrestlers' union. But the toughest part was yet to come - finding talent.

With T-Bolt's help, we lured three guys from Ann Gunkel's promotion - The Wild Samoans and the Magnificent Zulu. The Samoans (Afa and Sika Anoia), had been wrestling just a few years and used the crazed savage skit for their *heel* act. At about 300 pounds each with long, tangled hair and toothless grins, they *got heat* with the wrestling crowds. They ended up wrestling for Ann when other promotions wouldn't use them. Years later, they became WWF tag team champions on three different occasions, and Afa's son Samula entered wrestling in 1983 as Wild Samoan Samu; Afa is the uncle of contemporary wrestler The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), whose father was wrestler Rocky Johnson.

Zulu started wrestling in 1972 when the Sheik (Eddie Farhat) changed his name from Ron Pope to Magnificent Zulu, a reference to his six foot five, 300 pounds of pumped up physique. Zulu wasn't much of a wrestler, but had one of the best bodies in all of wrestling, certainly as well ripped as Hulk Hogan. He had been booked by The Sheik (Eddie Farhat)earlier in his career and had matches with Johnny Valentine, Lou Thesz and The Sheik that drew some of the biggest houses at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto since Bruno Sammartino worked there. But Zulu was a black man whose girlfriends were usually white, and this was at the center of several incidents that soured him on The Business.

With Afa and Sika and Zulu and T-Bolt, we needed some white wrestlers, and I later signed up The Enforcer (Robert Smith), The Executioner (Frank Hicki), Mr. Magnificent (Phil Watson, son of former NWA world champion Whipper Watson), Beautiful Bobby (Leon Brown), Frank Dillinger (Richard Shaw) and others. We unavoidably hired some *gebronies* and had to stage our shows in Georgia's small towns - places like Metter, Athens, Sparta, Rome, Newnan, Porterdale and Gainesville - because arenas in larger cities had exclusive contracts with Georgia Championship. Although we drew good crowds in small high school gyms, we encountered problems when we tried to promote in cities the NWA thought it owned, just as Ann Gunkel had. And the NWA's chokehold on arenas throughout Georgia was fiercely applied.

In Columbus, Georgia (a town *owned* by the NWA's Fred Ward), the city council rejected our application for a license to promote; in Rome, where police chief John Collins acted as our local promoter, the Rome City Auditorium became unavailable because a new floor had been installed; in

Albany, there were lots of problems: after we booked a Wednesday night wrestling show, the NWA's Fred Ward suddenly changed his weekly show from Thursday night to Tuesday; when our local promoter for Albany (my football teammate from Georgia and the Rams, Frank Richter) distributed posters for our show, they were torn down the next day; our Albany radio spots were preceded and followed by spots for Ward's promotion, a complicated combination of names and dates intended to confuse the audience and Ward's newspaper ads did the same thing. When we finally staged an Albany show, the crowd was filled with hecklers who interrupted the matches and our announcer's introductions. When we arrived for a show in Athens, there were no bleachers and the place looked like it hadn't been cleaned after the last time it was used; in Macon, we encountered Bill Lavery (Eddie Graham's friend and former manager of the Jacksonville Coliseum and the man who refused to book shows for Ann Gunkel) who refused us, too. Finally, we learned we had an informant in our midst when we discovered Mr. Magnificent (Phil Watson) was reporting to Tom Renesto about what we were doing and where; we fired him.

One night after our show in Newnan, Georgia, a young, black man walked up to T-Bolt in the parking lot. He said, "*Hey man, somebody wants to see you. You all need some help ? Hosea wants to see you.* I can get you in to talk with him if you need help." We accepted the offer. Hosea Williams had been an active and visible civil rights leader in the south, a lieutenant for Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the 1960s, and he was two weeks away from an election for Georgia state representative. T-Bolt and I met with Hosea, and told him about our problems in getting our IWL off the ground. We explained why we started our promotion - to provide some decent working conditions and treatment for pro wrestlers. Hosea was sympathetic, and said his mission involved not only *civil* rights for blacks, but *human* rights for all - even wrestlers. I think Hosea wasn't sure about us, but he invited us to make public appearances with him at campaign stops. We did, and drew large and enthusiastic crowds. Hosea was impressed, and suggested we work together. After Hosea was elected, T-Bolt and I were more assertive about cashing in our chips. We told Hosea we were ready to jump into the wrestling business in a big way and Hosea now offered to reciprocate. He said, "You need a promoter, and I've got one - Quinton Perry. You need a legal arm, and I've got one of them - J. O. Wyatt (who we also campaigned

for when he ran for county commissioner). You need to see these people." Hosea added, "I will get you the buildings. I will get you some money. Everything that I got, you got access to."

Hosea opened his access offer by giving us office space inside his church (our wrestlers had to go to church to get paid), and he produced three partners for our promotional venture: Perry, whose Taurus Productions already booked rock concerts in the southeast, agreed to book arenas for our wrestling shows; Wyatt agreed to handle contracts and legal work and Jesse Wilson, a well-heeled businessman, agreed to underwrite the promotion. When we got these guys together to discuss a plan for the future, we developed an agenda that involved a 20-city tour over two months, beginning with the Omni in Atlanta; profits from the 20 shows would be used to bankroll the wrestlers' union. Everyone on the team was enthusiastic, and confidant of its success.

Initially, every member of our team did what they were expected to do - until Georgia Championship and the NWA applied pressure and muscle. A few weeks after Perry booked a date at the Omni, the Omni manager called Perry into his office for a meeting to show him a document that had just arrived from the Waterloo, Iowa Police Department; when Perry was handed a police rap sheet on Claude Patterson, he showed it to Hosea who called a meeting with T-Bolt and me at his office. The next day, T-Bolt explained his police record: he'd been arrested in Waterloo 20 years earlier when he was 17 but the charges were later dropped. Hosea told him not to worry about it; meanwhile, when pressed for an explanation of the unsolicited rap sheet, the Waterloo police said somebody had called from Atlanta looking for "dirt on Thunderbolt Patterson."

About a week later, Perry got a telephone call from Jim Barnett who invited Perry to fly to Tampa to meet with Eddie Graham about promoting rock-and-wrestling shows in Florida. Perry made the mistake of telling Hosea about Barnett's invitation and Hosea decided to accompany Perry and Barnett to the meeting with Graham at Tampa's airport. When they returned from Tampa, Hosea told me, "Graham and Barnett bribed Perry to drop you." I didn't believe it, but when Perry canceled our Omni date, Hosea said there was nothing he could do about it. And our lawyer Wyatt couldn't think of anything to do about it, either. But as pro wrestlers, T-Bolt and I had more creative imagination; we were pretty good at devising

angles that would ratchet up some *heat* and we *shot an angle* on Hosea's radio program the next day. Always good on the *stick*, T-Bolt ripped into an emotional speech about "being black in a black city and letting the NWA do this to me when I have an organization to run." I chimed in, telling the largely black radio audience about the obstacles we'd encountered in running our wrestling promotion, including our most recent experience with the Omni. We ended our interview with an announcement: *if we didn't get rescheduled by the Omni, we'd drive our cars onto the front lawn of Atlanta's city hall and set them on fire as a protest!* Two days later, we were invited to meet with Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, the city's first black mayor. We told our story to Mayor Jackson and Vice Mayor Jules Sugarman and Michael Lomax, later chairman of the Fulton County Commission and now, president of Dillard University in New Orleans; a few days afterward, our Omni date was rescheduled - pencilled back in. It was one of my first lessons about the politics of wrestling.

With a new Omni date booked, we bought two television spots on Ted Turner's WTCG, Atlanta's channel 17. In 1974, Ted had not yet established his WTBS superstation, but WTCG was the primary link to the state's wrestling audience because it carried *Georgia Championship Wrestling* with Gordon Solie. The two 30-second TV spots we purchased were "adjacencies" - ads shown immediately before and after the NWA wrestling show. A few days later, WTCG called to say our spots had been canceled and the cancellation command had been personally communicated by Ted Turner. But knowing Ted had previously sold spots to Ann Gunkel, we threatened legal action and Turner backed down - our spots were run. The wrestling industry's hardball tactics continued: a few weeks before our Omni show, T-Bolt got a call from Gary Hart (Gary Williams), then Barnett's *booker,* Hart asked T-Bolt to return to work for Georgia Championship and T-Bolt told him to go to hell. A few nights later, T-Bolt got another call, this one from The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) who was in Atlanta to wrestle on one of Barnett's wrestling shows; The Sheik said he needed to talk, and invited T-Bolt to come to the Marriott Hotel. When T-Bolt went to The Sheik's room that night, The Sheik told him: *"Thunderbolt, you are a good wrestler and you are a top talent. You should be booked all over the country. I can get you booked all over the country. But, you know, the only way you can get booked in The Business is if the promoter wants you. You should be making at least $2,000 a week.."* And The Sheik added: *"We got*

you booked, you know you're in. All you have to do is just leave Wilson" T-Bolt told The Sheik to tell Barnett to go to hell, too.

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Despite NWA and Georgia Championship tactics to kill our promotion, we continued to stage small wrestling shows in Georgia's little towns. By now, however, as I went to the mat each night, I sensed the prospect of even more trouble inside the ring. In those days, I was in good physical shape and not one who was easily intimidated physically, but I sensed the retributory terror that only recalcitrant wrestlers understand. With first-hand knowledge about how The Business traditionally dealt with its enemies, I was uneasy: *worked* wrestling requires you to give your body to people you know will take care of it. Now, as I went to the mat nightly with other renegades in an *outlaw* promotion, I didn't have that trust. The uncertainty was unsettling, and I wondered privately which of my opponents might have been paid to snap a leg or arm or turn the *blade* around.

One week before our Omni show in September 1974, the ex-Olympic wrestler Bob Roop (who had done some dirty work for Eddie Graham in Florida and elsewhere) was sent to Atlanta to wrestle for Georgia Championship Wrestling. Bob later testified in legal proceedings about why he was in Georgia: "I was brought back to Atlanta by Jim Barnett and the first night I was in the dressing room he asked me in front of about 30 wrestlers - he had some newly sprung- up competition there that was headed by a gentleman named Thunderbolt Patterson, who was black and most of the blacks in Atlanta loved him, and he felt he was being treated unfairly, so he started to form his own organization and promote himself and other wrestlers there. Jim Barnett said hello to me and then he called a meeting of all wrestlers together and *he asked me, in front of all of them,, if I thought that I was capable of beating Thunderbolt Patterson and putting him out of business. I said that it was a moot point because he was my friend and I wasn't going to do that sort of thing.*. I lasted in Mr. Barnett's territory there in Atlanta, I lasted three weeks. About two weeks later Jim Barnett said, 'My God, I don't even know what you're doing here.'"

On another Friday night at about this time, I went to a Georgia Championship wrestling show just to see other boys and be seen by Atlanta's wrestling fans. Later, Bob Roop also testified about that night: "One of the competition's wrestlers came to the matches one evening and one of Jim Barnett s associates, a gentlemen named Leon Ogle [Fred Ward's son-in-law], came up to me and asked me to go out to the ring and try to entice the gentleman [Jim Wilson] that was sitting at ringside to come in the ring - another wrestler. Again, it's a man that's a friend of mine - and entice him into the ring and hurt him. Discredit him, in other words, so that all the people that would be there at the Atlanta auditorium that night would see that this man was not what he seemed to be because a lot of professional wrestling is built on illusion and if you take somebody down and hurt them in 15 seconds, you know, they're helpless, then the illusion of them being tough is automatically dispelled and that's enough probably... to remove the drawing power that this person might have against what's considered the established promotion" I didn't know any of this until years later when I was given a copy of Bob's deposition for another lawsuit. But I do know that Bob's refusal to stretch me didn't help his career in the NWA.

A few days before our Omni show, I went to another Jim Barnett-NWA wrestling show in Augusta, Georgia to distribute leaflets for our upcoming Omni matches. After getting a permit to hand out leaflets, I drove to Bell Auditorium and parked in the rear where wrestlers usually put their cars. As I walked through the parking lot with a couple thousand leaflets in my arms, I was met by Harley Race and Jackie Lee Welch, Lester's son. As they approached, I sensed I was about to be jumped. Although I wasn't intimidated by Harley, despite his reputation as a legit tough guy, I wasn't interested in getting into it with two of them. I turned and headed for a narrow alley that led to the front of the building and Harley and Jackie Lee followed me briskly. At about the very moment I expected to get clubbed from behind, a bunch of kids appeared in the gangway, yelling, "Hey, Big Jim! Hey Brother, how ya doin', man? Who ya gonna wup tonight?" When the kids appeared, Harley and Jackie Lee backed off and I continued to the

front of the building where fans had lined up at the ticket windows and were milling around the entrance. I turned around to see if Harley and Jackie Lee were following me, but they disappeared. So I walked over to one of the policemen stationed in front of the building and told him, “Look there’s a couple of guys here who want to make trouble with me, and I called you this afternoon and you know, everything’s okay. I talked to police chief Jenkins about handing out these leaflets.” Recognizing me, the cop said, “Thanks for the tip, Jim,” and he waived me into the crowd.

Suddenly, Harley and Jackie Lee bolted through the front doors to where I was standing and passing out leaflets. Harley swaggered to within an inch of my nose.

“You ain’t gonna hand these fuckin’ things out,” he snorted.

“Oh yes, I am and you ain’t gonna do a fuckin’ thing about it,” I snapped.

It was an intense exchange and Harley’s veins were popping out around his thick neck. Jackie Lee stood behind Race, jutting out his jaw and trying to look tough. When Harley began pushing and shoving, the police stepped between us and one of the cops restrained him. With the police separating us, I yelled to the milling crowd: “Will you please, please hold these leaflets and we’ll have a match right here in front of the building and no one will have to pay to see it!” The fans encircled us, and some of the kids shouted encouragement. Harley became angrier, and one policeman said, “Come on Jim, this ain’t the way to do it.” Finally, Harley and Jackie Lee Welch stomped back into the arena and I finished handing out the leaflets and left.

The next night, I drove to another Barnett-NWA Georgia Championship show in Macon, Georgia with more leaflets to distribute. That afternoon, when I went to the police station to get permission to hand them out, I was told the Macon Coliseum was located on private property and I could distribute leaflets if I stayed off Coliseum grounds. So I stood near the parking lot ticket booth, handing leaflets to incoming carloads of wrestling fans. After awhile, three carloads of Barnett’s NWA wrestlers arrived and Harley Race jumped out of one of them, screaming at me.

“You ain’t gonna fucking do this shit again tonight, Wilson!”

“Oh yes, I am Harley,” I snapped.

Before the confrontation continued, the Coliseum's manager Bill Lavery ran to the parking lot with another policeman. Lavery grabbed the cop's nightstick and jammed it under my chin. "Don't you lay a hand on me", I shouted, knocking the stick to the ground. Lavery screamed back at me, "You get your ass out of here or I'm gonna have you locked up!" and two state cops escorted me to the street while Harley laughed and sneered. Afterward, I stood in the middle of the street waiving at incoming cars to slow down so I could hand them a leaflet.

The night before our Omni show, I took about 5,000 leaflets to Barnett's Friday night show at Atlanta's City Auditorium. I was joined by T-Bolt, Zulu and some other wrestlers on our Omni card and we milled around the entrance, handing out leaflets to everyone. Before long, Harley Race and Buddy Colt strolled over to where we were standing, laughing. "You guys are gonna lose your ass tomorrow night," Harley sneered. "You only got $3,000 in advance tickets." I looked over at T-Bolt, wondering how the hell Harley knew about our slow advance ticket sales. "You guys are gonna be history," yelled Harley. "We'll see, we'll see," we snapped back.

❖

I didn't sleep well the night before our Omni show because I was anxious. We had gambled a lot to stage an *opposition* show against Georgia Championship in its hometown at Atlanta's largest and newest arena, but we were confident, too. I couldn't wait to learn how successful we would be. The morning of the show, I arose early and opened the front door to grab the newspaper. Then, looking into the yard, I thought it peculiar that the kids' German Shepherd was sleeping under our bedroom window. I called to Baron, and I called again; he was dead. He'd been bludgeoned to death in an ugly act that sent chills up my spine, and it transmitted a message of terror to Nita and the kids: *like the mob, the wrestling business plays hardball.* Another odd incident unfolded later that morning, and it involved Bearcat Wright who had been working with us for about two weeks. Bearcat had walked into a show we promoted in Gainesville, Georgia to see his friend T-Bolt and asked if there was something he could

do to help us. Well, we needed all the help we could get, and so he moved in with T-Bolt and started going to our shows, making booking suggestions about the matches. Bearcat was probably about 50 then and although he was sick, suffering from sickle-cell anemia, he had a wealth of experience from which we could obviously benefit. And, we thought, sympathy with our cause to provide a new wrestling life outside the NWA; in addition, Bearcat was a personal hero in wrestling for T-Bolt (because of a legendary incident in Chicago in the early 1960s when Bearcat and Johnny Valentine forced promoter Fred Kohler to pay them in cash prior to a *blowoff* match for a famous feud at the International Amphitheater). So Bearcat's interest was welcomed and he also was distributing leaflets with us the night before at Atlanta's City Auditorium.

After telling Nita and the kids about Baron, I telephoned T-Bolt to ask if he and Bearcat wanted to watch Georgia Championship's TV show at my place or their's. In previous months, we routinely watched Barnett's *Georgia Championship Wrestling* TV show so we could monitor their tactics to out-promote us with championship matches and other *gimmicks.* T-Bolt said Bearcat had gone out for breakfast and invited me to come to his apartment to watch the NWA's show. After driving over there, we switched on Barnett's TV show and watched the opening cutaway in utter silence: There he was - Bearcat Wright - with his little beany cap, managing one of Barnett's Georgia Championship wrestlers. After a few painful minutes, I turned to T-Bolt whose eyes were closed. "Holy shit," I said, "He sold us down the river." We shut off T-Bolt's TV and sat in silence for awhile. T-Bolt didn't say anything, and he didn't need to; neither one of us should have been surprised because we already knew there are no loyalties or first principles nor lasting friendships in the wrestling business. Beyond that, however, we had an Omni wrestling show to produce in a few hours, and we needed to get busy.

Atlanta's cavernous Omni Arena filled fast on the night of October 4, 1974 and by showtime at 8:30, its turnstiles had already clicked 9,200 revolutions. As T-Bolt and I surveyed the growing crowd from backstage, we got excited and continually ran out from the dressing rooms to *count the house.* We both knew that wrestling crowds usually grow after a show starts, and if our arithmetic was right, our little *outlaw* wrestling show was about to produce the first pro wrestling sellout achieved at the Omni by Georgia Championship or Ann Gunkel or anybody else. And this would be an historic night for the legitimate business side of professional wrestling because it was a milestone event for pro wrestlers everywhere: *for the first time anywhere, wrestlers had signed contracts for fifty percent (50%) of the gate, scaled according to their place on the card; it was only one wrestling show, but a historic occasion for labor relations in The Business.*

We got the show underway with a match between The Butcher and Captain Soul which went well until about halfway through their allotted time when the Omni crowd stopped growing. Noticing the slowdown in late arrivals, I ran up the stairs to the Omni's main entrance where I found the outside doors closed and locked. I asked ushers why the doors were locked and was told that Omni manager Tom Kuna walked by at 8:30 and told ushers the new Omni policy was to lock the outside doors at showtime, which for our show was 8:30. When I couldn't believe I'd been told the truth, I ran around the building to find Kuna but was told he'd gone home. He'd gone home, sick, I was told. By the time I returned to the dressing room and told T-Bolt what had happened, our second match between Super Assassin and Tonga Kid was underway and we had no clue about what to do next. Except continue with our third match between Levi Banks and Beautiful Bobby. But during their match, one of our security guys raced into the locker room, screaming the ring had just fallen apart; when we ran back to the arena floor, Banks and Bobby had already left a fallen down mass of entangled plastic-covered ropes. It was embarrassing and obvious sabotage: wrestling rings don't collapse when their post supports and turnbuckles are properly installed, and these were. Fortunately, no one was

hurt but we called an unscheduled intermission to reconstruct the wrestling ring. The fourth match featured Zulu and Mountain Man Goliath and then came a mixed tag match between Sheila Reeves and Johnny Ringo against Christie Nichols and Gama Singh. While I wrestled Big Tank Patton in the sixth match, I was thinking about getting a good attorney in the morning. The seventh match on the card was a tag team event with The Samoans against The Medics, managed by Dr. Blood.

While T-Bolt destroyed Chief Billy Blue Rivers and his manager Gen. Homer O'Dell in the final match on the card, I walked up to the Omni business office to get everybody's checks. Kuna's secretary told me we'd have to wait until Monday morning for the checks because all the Omni's costs hadn't been tabulated; when Monday came, I was told to wait until Tuesday. By now, our wrestlers were angry about not getting their promised *payoffs,* even after signing formal contracts. Tuesday came, and so did another surprise: *after the Omni Arena calculated its expenses, our net was $1,800 - because although the gross gate had been $29,582, the O)mni claimed over $11,000for expenses which left about $16,000 as the show's net. But $14,000 had fallen through cracks between fingers of some open hands.* In the following months, there were accusations and lawsuits and a near fistfight when T-Bolt threatened to beat up Hosea Williams. Three months after that Omni show, the local prosecutor (Fulton County Solicitor General Clayton Secord) conducted an unannounced raid of Omni offices armed with a search warrant, ordering Omni personnel to surrender all documents pertaining to our show; results of the raid were stunning: among Omni Arena documents were *two versions* of the final accounting statement - one showed expenses of $11,555 (the correct one) and the other showed expenses of $20,059.26. The second version was a *work,* a lie.

Although I ultimately found out where the missing money went, I couldn't prove it in court without a trail of paper or confessions. Later, I sued Wyatt, Perry, the Omni's Kuna and Omni management and we settled out of court several years afterward, but I was never able to pay the wrestlers what I had promised them; after having secured their trust with signed contracts and the promise of no- more-business-as-usual, they inevitably concluded that Wilson and Patterson were doing business-as-usual after all. Some wrestlers accused me of taking the money. Not quite: my noble efforts to start a fair-minded wrestling promotion in *opposition* to

the NWA's Georgia Championship and establish a wrestlers' union had wiped me out financially. I was so deeply in debt, I lost my family's home when I refinanced it to bankroll our new IWL company and I had to borrow money from my family to pay for the birth of my son Dwight, our sixth child. If anyone was a *mark* in all of this, it was me - even though I knew The Business was built on predatory business practices, I never dreamed the wrestling establishment would go to these lengths to *kill* us, to put us out of business. In retrospect, I was naive - too trusting in my belief that honesty, fairness and hard work were the American way to success. Were these principles just cliches? Was it all a *work*?

There is a revealing footnote to that ill-fated Omni show. Seven years later, T-Bolt spent a long evening with The Sheik, reflecting about their lives and times in The Business. As they reminisced about their wrestling experiences, T-Bolt started telling The Sheik about the night in 1974 when the Omni closed its doors on us. The Sheik interrupted him - *"Yes, I know everything that happened. How they didn't let nobody else in and you didn't have no money to pay the guys. But that was the only way to stop you"*

Although our Omni show had been a financial failure, it at least succeeded in scaring the National Wrestling Alliance and Georgia Championship Wrestling. According to Tim Woods and other NWA wrestlers, our ill-fated show sent shockwaves through The Business - never had an *outlaw* promotion come that close to displacing the established NWA promotion in Atlanta. The other reason that show got some attention was the wrestlers' union we organized drew interest among NWA wrestlers who couldn't talk about it openly; most wrestlers approved of our attempt to bring wrestling's labor relations into the 20th century. Oddly, the attention our failed Omni show got *inside* The Business encouraged me to continue to fight from the *outside*. I concluded not all had been lost and this wrestling war wasn't yet over.

Returning to our original business plan, I reviewed where we'd been and what we had aimed to do. That Omni show was to have been the first of 20 shows booked around the country and in Samoa, the next stop on the

tour. The idea to stage wrestling in Samoa came from Afa and Sika who said they could use their influence in that part of the world. I rolled the dice three weeks later and continued with our planned tour. We left Atlanta for the six shows booked in Pago Pago, and our first show was a sellout with a $10,000 gate. But then local officials filed a tax lien against us and a stop-order that prevented us from promoting the remaining five shows - or even leaving the islands. While all of us were imprisoned for two weeks, we learned that island officials had been *helped* in these matters by Jim Barnett and the NWA's Peter Maivia (the Rock's grandfather) who *owned* this part of the Pacific. We protested to no avail and sent telegrams asking for help to President Nixon and Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge. The delinquent tax charges were later dropped when proven false, but the damage done was considerable.

We returned to the states and when Nita met me at the Atlanta airport she told me I cared more about wrestling than about our family. I didn't see it that way, but she certainly did, and said that since I'd been kicked out of the NWA, I hadn't given her or our family any security. She and our kids were sick and tired of wrestling and wrestling promotion and forming a union for wrestlers, she said. Then she handed over the final repossession notice on the house, and asked what Iintended to do about it. It was a tragic time, and it has haunted me ever since. She was in many ways right - since entering pro wrestling, I *was* gone most of the time while our kids were growing up without me and without my help; she was stuck at home with dirty dishes and laundry and cooking while I was off wrestling or talking with lawyers or trying to get somebody elected who promised to help us. Nita also took a dim view of my business practices, especially jeopardizing my family's home in North Atlanta - our most important possession and source of family stability. I told her I remained convinced that with more time and money, the IWL would become a successful business because I remained confident of my abilities and the marketability of our IWL promotion - after all, we attracted a large Omni crowd with just two thirty-second spots on television. And I admitted to one fundamental lapse in judgment: I had miscalculated the lengths to which The Business would go to snuff out competition. When I borrowed against our house to finance the fledgling promotion, it never occurred to me that an arena manager would be bribed to prevent our customers from seeing the show; or that expenses would be padded and then certified as correct.

So we lost the house and the whole family moved to an apartment. Just before Christmas, I booked two more wrestling shows in North Carolina but we drew poorly when the NWA put on championship matches the night before our shows. Our International Wrestling League was finally exhausted and so was Ann Gunkel's promotion that ceased operation at about the same time. But the Battle For Atlanta was not over.

My father Edward Wilson was a highly decorated Navy Captain in World War II. When I was a boy on Dad's lap, he placed my small hand on the pieces of shrapnel and slugs still lodged in his head, located too close to his brain to remove. *Jim Wilson collection.*

When I was a ten-year-old beanpole in 1951, I saw a movie that changed my life: Jim Thorpe, All American, which inspired me to overcome a congenital spinal condition and work hard to become an All-American running back just like Thorpe. Jim Wilson collection

After the University of Georgia recruited me from Edgewood High School in Pennsylvania, I expected to play fullback but the era of the big running back had not yet arrived in the Southeastern Conference. Georgia put me on the line at right tackle, both offensive and defensive. *Photo, courtesy of University of Georgia Athletic Department.*

In 1964, I was a consensus selection to the SEC All- Conference team and to the Associated Press All-American Team, the Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA) All- American Team, the Helms Foundation All-American Team and *Sports Extra* Hall of Fame. *Associated Press photo.*

My signing with the San Francisco 49ers after the 1964 Sun Bowl game made headlines in *Newsweek* magazine and brought reforms in the recruiting of collegiate athletes by pro football. *Newsweek (Jan. 18, 1965)*

After one year with the San Francisco 49ers, I was elected to United Press International's All- NFL Rookie Team in 1965, but I asked 49er management to trade me to the Atlanta Falcons so I could get more playing time. When the Falcons disapproved of my off-season wrestling, they traded me to the Los Angeles Rams, where Coach George Allen approved of *both* my football play and pro wrestling. *Photo, courtesy of Los Angeles Rams.*

When I played offensive tackle for the Rams, I was one of the team's faster players in windsprints. Left to right: Wilson, Joe Scibelli, Mike Lahood, Don Chuey, Charlie Cowan and Herschel Turner. *Courtesy of George Allen's Inside Football, Allyn Bacon (1970)*

This photo of my blocking a Pittsburgh Steeler was selected by George Allen as an illustration in his autobiography of how to block downfield. *Courtesy of George Allen's Inside Football, Allyn Bacon (1970).*

Rams Coach George Allen gave me a game ball after the Rams-Packer game at Milwaukee in October 1968. On that day, I (77) was pitted against Green Bay's All- Pro Willie Davis in a game we won. The Rams' Henry Dyer (35) is carrying the ball with Green Bay's Lee Roy Caffey (60) in pursuit. *Photo, courtesy Associated Press.*

This photo was taken by Jack Brisco on Eddie Graham's yacht one day in 1970 when the three of us fished for marlin in Tampa Bay. Not many wrestlers were invited to play with the National Wrestling Alliance big boys, but my football credentials and friendship with Jack got me inside wrestling's inner circle; this was the day that Graham offered to be my personal booker and get me into Madison Square Garden. *Photo by Jack Brisco.*

During the years I played for the Los Angeles Rams, entertainer Jim Nabors (3rd from left) sang the national anthem at all home games. On one occasion, Nabors brought his friend Rock Hudson (far left) to a Ram's Player's dinner party at Nabors home in the Hollywood hills. I'm standing next to Richie Pettibon, later head coach of the Washington Redskins and Joe Sullivan, Rams assistant coach. *Photo, courtesy of Jim Nabors.*

On my wrestling tour of Japan in 1972, I was billed as an American football badguy because American wrestlers almost always played heel when they worked in Japan and lost to the local Japanese guys. The *heel* role requirement to get spectators angry by hollering and snarling at them and attacking opponents with a thumb to the throat, kicking, scratching, punching and biting was more fun than I expected. *Photo, Jim Wilson collection.*

This poster from my Japan tour shows The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) as the headliner, and this is when I finally met pro wrestling's legendary character. His foreign menace act produced as much *heat* in Japan as anywhere else, and when I saw him count his money in the locker room *before* his matches

that didn't last but a few minutes, I knew I wasn't going to miss my career in pro football. *Jim Wilson collection.*

As an American *heel* in Japan, I was expected to turn headlocks into chokeholds. Although the referee's job was to prevent *heel* mayhem, the Japanese audience has learned to expect less gimmickry and more matwork with traditional wrestling holds. Japanese pro wrestling also is *worked*, but it is usually treated more seriously as sport (not performance) by the press. *Jim Wilson collection.*

One of the Japanese wrestlers I lost to was Seiji Sakaguchi, then Japanese United National Champion. In this match, I asked Seiji not to use his backbreaker *finisher* because of my recent back surgery (see encircled scar), and I explained this at length in the locker room before our match. Of course, he didn't understand anything I said and used it anyway. That's a hazard of wrestling in a country where the *boys* don't speak the same

language, but the *payoffs* in Japan were the best I'd seen in wrestling. *Jim Wilson Collection*

The most enthusiastic wrestling fan in the Carter clan was the President's mother Miz Lillian, who cheered for *babyfaces* at matches in Americus, Albany, and Columbus, Georgia where she was chauf- feured in long, black limousines. Miz Lillian's prominence pleased Georgia's wrestling promoters, and it got her into the locker rooms to meet the *boys.* Shown here with Miz Lillian (left to right): promoter Fred Ward and wrestlers Tommy Wildfire Rich, Bob Armstrong, Tony Atlas and Johnny Walker. *Columbus Ledger- Enquirer photo.*

With my legitimate athletic credentials, I thought I had enough going for me in wrestling that cutting my forehead was unecessary. This is one of the rare *blade jobs* I performed, and it was demanded by Columbus, Georgia wrestling promoter Fred Ward (left) as a condition of getting paid. Afterward, Big Fred was so pleased with my razor cut, he had his

photographers memorialize it. Years later, this old photo embarrassed Fred: when he was asked by a reporter about my *juicing* incident, he denied ever having talked to me. *Photo, Columbus, Georgia wrestling program.*

This famous picture tells a lot about the politics of wrestling and the relationship between politics and pro wrestling. One newspaper columnist drew parallels between the two this way: “both are lathered with propoganda, fibs, slogans, boasts and soundbites.” The other guy in the picture is Johnny Walker, Mr. Wrestling II, my first tagteam partner in The Business. *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer Photo.*

This picture is not famous, but a rare view of Georgia Championship Wrestling boss, booker of the NWA’s world champion for many years and formerly the *godfather* of pro wrestling - Jim Barnett. Photos of Barnett

virtually never appeared in wrestling circles and he was never shown on televised wrestling shows, but this picture appeared in the *Washington Post* after his appointment by President Carter to the National Arts Council. *Photo reprinted by permission of Gittings Studio, Atlanta.*

After the National Wrestling Alliance blacklisted me, I wrestled for Ann Gunkel's *outlaw* promotion in 1974. Here, I seem to be delivering a thumb to the throat of Lord Jonathon Boyd while referee Charlie Smith is distracted. *Photo, courtesy of Scott Teal.*

After we were both blacklisted by the National Wrestling Alliance, Thunderbolt Patterson and I established our own wrestling company, International Wrestling League. We also established a wrestlers' union in Georgia and offered all wrestlers written contracts that promised them *payoffs* of 50% of revenues. When the National Wrestling Alliance monopoly saw what we were up to, it launched a bloody war to put us out of business. *Jim Wilson collection.*

This poster shows out ill-fated 1983 promotional partnership with Atlanta's civil rights movement, a charity event intended to raise funds to support the anniversary of Martin Luther King's March on Washington. Featured performers were two of wrestling's famous *outlaws* —The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) and Bruiser Brody (Frank Goodish). Although Atlanta Mayor Andy Young issued a proclamation designating the event as an officially recognized occasion, the City Wide Tenants Association was unable to sell *one* ticket to the show, which was canceled with a lot of unanswered questions left hanging in the hot, humid summer air. *Jim Wilson collection.*

The Brisco brothers, Jack (left) and Jerry, are actually brothers and native Americans who made it big in the wrestling business. My close friendship with Jack in the late 1960s and early 1970s taught me much about the inner workings of The Business and how to succeed in it. Ultimately, I rejected Jack's advice to *go with the program* but Jack may have proved his point in 1973 when he became National Wrestling Alliance world champion and I was blacklisted. *Photo courtesy of Wrestling News.*

Before he became National Wrestling Alliance world champion, Ronnie Garvin (Roger Barnes) was asked in court proceedings what would happen if he refused to lose. Ronnie replied under oath: “If you do not do what they [promoters] tell you to do . . . he’ll [promoter] send somebody out there and try to hurt me becuase he’ll have somebody. They all do. It sort of keeps the wrestlers in line.” *Photo courtesy of Wrestling News.*

Bob Roop was a legitimate Olympic wrestler used as a *hitman* to injure other wrestlers and *squash* promotional competitors. In court proceedings, Bob revealed: “I was considered sort of an enforcer simply just for the basic fact that I can wrestle . . . I was told to go out and *stretch* them, which is a fairly ambiguous term. It was to me at the time.” *Photo courtesy of Wrestling News.*

Antone “Ripper” Leone began his wrestling career in 1930 when he was 14 and wrestled in every state and more than 100 countries. After the National Wrestling Alliance was formed, Ripper was blacklisted when he refused to become a *contract stooge.* Forced to earn a living outside wrestling, Ripper became a successful businessman who often shared his wealth with down-and-out ex-wrestlers. In 1980, Ripper was blacklisted again when he tried to operate a wrestling promotion in California. Ripper died at age 78 in March 1994. *Photo courtesy of Scott Teal.*

Eddie Faieta got into wrestling because he “had a good body and was athletic enough to do a somersault” but he was used by promoters as a career *jobber.* One of the promoters he befriended was Joe “Toots” Mondt who made deals with wrestlers: their wives for a *push;* one of wrestling’s stars who Eddie *put over* was a drunk Gorgeous George. Eddie spent his final years in poverty and illness, and he died blind from diabetic nephropathy in 1993 at age 64. *Photo courtesy of Scott Teal.*

Bruiser Brody (Frank Goodish) was pro wrestling's most famous *outlaw* performer in the early 1980s because he was vigilant about his *payoffs* and match instructions. Frank's independence cost him his life at age 42: he was murdered in a Puerto Rican locker room in 1988 during an argument with the wrestler- *booker* who allegedly stabbed him to death. After a botched police investigation, the defendant was acquitted in court and turned from *heel* to *babyface* in the wrestling arenas. The full truth about the circumstances of Frank's death may never be told. *Photo courtesy of Wrestling News.*

After the *America Talks Back* show on Lifetime cable in 1985, host Stanley Sigel and fellow whistleblower Eddie Mansfield and I hammed it up without Lou Thesz who stalked off the set. *Photo courtesy of Lifetime-TV.*

My son Josh, who helped me out on the picket line when he was a young boy, with his wife Maria and my first grandchild, Hector James.

I was gratified that my family wanted to be part of my Georgia Sports Hall of Fame induction, traveling from afar to attend the event. Shown here are: Nita and our daughters Suzanne and Christina and sons Brad, Brett, and Dwight. Photo, W.T. Johnson.

Coach Vince Dooley has been a supporter since I became his first All-American football player at the University of Georgia. In later years, Coach Dooley lent his support to one of my real estate ventures, and promoted my election to the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 2001. *Jim Wilson collection.*

Chapter 7

U N M A S K I N G T H E C O N S P I R A C Y

MY FRIENDSHIP WITH Jack Brisco brought me inside the wrestling business, and he's the guy who *smartened me up* to certain forms of promoter skullduggery, such as *stretching,* backroom deals about the *strap* and stealing other promoters' territories. But Pedro (Ignacio) Martinez told me some wrestling *history* secrets in 1975 that nobody else seemed to know. Good old Pedro really *smartened me up,* and I never had the chance to thank him.

I got to know Pedro when Chicago White Sox president and sports television whiz Eddie Einhorn came on the pro wrestling scene with his own *outlaw* promotion, the International Wrestling Alliance (IWA). Einhorn's name was synonymous with tube sport, having brought college basketball to prime time television in the late 1960s with his TVS Television Network. It was Einhorn who introduced junk sport to network audiences as producer of *CBS Sports Spectacular,* and his view of sport as entertainment (as opposed to something sacred) made him well suited for pro wrestling. Einhorn's wrestling promotion was managed on a day-to-day basis by Pedro Martinez, former NWA promoter in Buffalo and Rochester and later in Cleveland. Pedro was probably in his late 60s at the time, a real character in The Business from wrestling's earlier days. Pedro had been a wrestler in the late 1930s and a wrestling promoter since the early 1940s. He was a fast-talking, squeaky-voiced fireplug. And a real money guy, best remembered in wrestling circles for decking Joe "Toots" Mondt in the Madison Square Garden dressing room after Pedro bought Mondt's Manhattan Booking Agency but was cheated on the price. Pedro told stories, mostly about money. He was fascinated with which guys had made big money during his years in The Business, stemming back a long time. He claimed that Buddy Rogers made $250,000 in his peak years in the early 1960s and Gorgeous George made $225,000 in the 1950s before spending it all on women and drink and raising hell and ending up broke. He claimed Lou Thesz made about $150,000 to $200,000 during his best years before three divorces took most of it. And he claimed Antonino Rocca made as

much as $150,000 a year in the 1950s, but lost most of it to his handlers Toots Mondt and Kola Kawariani who took two-thirds of Rocca's *payoffs*. Pedro knew all about the darker side of the wrestling business, having been there himself for many years.

Eddie Einhorn and Pedro Martinez arranged to have their own world champion - the Mexican wrestler "of a thousand masks," Mil Mascaras, and attracted other wrestlers by offering contracts with guaranteed minimums. That also got the wrestling industry's attention: besides our IWL, no one had ever given contracts to *all* wrestlers before, just the champions and a few stars. When Einhorn's clout in the broadcast industry helped him get a TV slot on Ted Turner's WTCG- TV without the usual hassles, wrestlers around the country were certain this was an *opposition* promotion that was going to go somewhere. And Einhorn's IWL would be the country's first truly *national outlaw* promotion, going into all the NWA territories.

Pedro contacted T-Bolt and invited him to wrestle for them at 10% of the gates. Naturally, T-Bolt jumped at the chance. He continued to wrestle for small independent promoters in South Carolina and Georgia as well but when Einhorn's promotion moved into North Carolina, T-Bolt sold out their first show in Charlotte. That was the night T-Bolt learned it wouldn't be possible to be paid while wrestling in North Carolina: his earnings were garnished by the state tax department. T-Bolt was told he owed $1,800 in taxes and $8,000 to the Crocketts who had filed a lien against T-Bolt's earnings. Pedroagreed to put T-Bolt's 10% into an escrow account. A little later, I joined T-Bolt and other wrestlers to work for Pedro and Einhorn. I wrestled Ernie Ladd one night in Winston-Salem and we had a hell of a match. The *heat* was tremendous, and I did a *job* for Ernie. When we got back to the dressing room, Ernie said, 'Jim, you're the best *babyface* Einhorn has." His *heel gimmick* was a thumb thrust and a big boot to the face when you came off the ropes. It was not much of a *gimmick,* but Ernie was so big he didn't need to do much. At six feet nine and 315 pounds, what he had going for him was his enormous size. He could have crushed you, he was so big. And he was an athlete, having played football at Grambling and then in the NFL for eight years with the San Diego Chargers, Houston Oilers and Kansas City Chiefs.

Working for Pedro and Einhorn was fine, but I wanted to continue promoting our own IWL shows, too. So T-Bolt and I agreed to wrestle for

Einhorn when we weren't busy with our promotion and we sometimes co-promoted shows with them. But we continued to struggle against NWA counter-tactics. When we got a town booked, the NWA would come in and promote championship matches against us to hurt our draw. We tried to promote with Tony Marino in Toledo, but the NWA promoted all around us and it didn't take. We couldn't get on television and we couldn't rent the big halls. And our backers didn't have the money or interest to take the expensive struggle to court. The same predatory tactics were used by the NWA against Einhorn's IWA, and Pedro continually grumbled to Einhorn's wrestlers about the legal implications of the NWA's clout. Pedro was no lawyer but he seemed smarter than most wrestling promoters I'd met and he had been both an NWA insider and later, an *outlaw.*

One night in the dressing room, Pedro was talking to the wrestlers about the wrestling industry's *history* of blacklisting and blocking competitors, and he told the following story: the United States Justice Department had investigated the National Wrestling Alliance in the mid-1950s for illegal ("anti-competitive") business practices. According to Pedro, the Feds had concluded the NWA was a *national conspiracy* that used gangster business practices - illegal territorial divisions, illegal arena monopolies and rampant blacklisting of wrestlers. Pedro said when the Justice Department finished its investigation, it filed a lawsuit against NWA promoters and forced them to sign a *consent decree* by which they agreed to stop their illegal business practices. That *consent judgment* was signed in 1956 but the NWA's illegal practices had continued for 19 years into 1975. Emphatically, Pedro said, "Everything they're doing is illegal." And he seemed to know what he was talking about - he was one of the 35 NWA promoters forced by the Justice Department to sign that 1956 consent judgment.

What Pedro told us that night changed my life over the next few years. It should have been no surprise, I guess, that The Business had been riding roughshod over wrestling's landscape for so many years - that probably explained why the NWA guys were so well prepared for The Battle For Atlanta. But how was the NWA able to get away with its corruption and

criminality for so long? None of the other wrestlers seemed to know or even care because they were too self-absorbed with nightly parties and next week's bookings; of course, most of them also had no *business* experience with the NWA as an *outlaw* promotion, either. They may have heard about *blacklisting*, but had not experienced *blocking.* In those respects, I was different from the other *boys* because I'd experienced both, and I did something then no other wrestler had done: I contacted the Justice Department to learn more about the NWA's history of legal troubles.

One sunny afternoon in March 1975, I walked through the doors of the Justice Department's Atlanta office to ask for information about that 1956 consent decree and talk about my problems with the wrestling business. By now, President Nixon had resigned in disgrace over the Watergate scandal and the new President was Gerald Ford. President Ford's attorney general was Edward H. Levi, formerly the dean of the University of Chicago Law School, but the man I talked to was Justice Department attorney Jack Williamson. Williamson confirmed the existence of the 1956 consent judgment and told me the NWA's compliance with it was *still under investigation!* And when I talked about my own experiences with NWA tactics, he seemed knowledgeable about what I told him. He asked me to write down factual details concerning NWA misconduct, and I went home and drafted a handwritten 50-page memorandum that I delivered to his office a few days later.

At about this time, I learned about a recently enacted Federal statute named The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), a law passed by Congress after the Nixon Watergate scandal that provided ordinary citizens access to records and files kept by Government agencies in Washington. When I was told that all federal agencies had a FOIA office to respond to such requests from citizens, I fired off a letter to Justice Department headquarters in Washington and asked for a copy of its file on the wrestling business —the investigation that Pedro Martinez talked about. About two months later, a large package of more than 3,000 pages arrived in my mailbox - a mound of paper that included FBI reports and Justice Department internal memos dating back to the 1940s. At the very front of this stack of paper was a record of the file's outside distribution: *I was the only wrestler or wrestling promoter who had ever requested to see these files.*

It took me several weeks to read it all, but this is what that large box of papers boiled down to: Justice Department investigators and FBI agents had been listening to stories like mine about the wrestling industry's illegal business tactics *since 1953!* The files contained dozens of references to the NWA's *blacklisting wrestlers, boycotting promotional competitors, illegally allocating exclusive territorial booking offices, death threats, ordered stretchings, contract beatings, front men, bribes to athletic commissions and newspaper editors and destruction of outlaw arenas and rogue promoters' homes by arson.* In short, the wrestling business had been up to its cauliflowered ears in legal trouble since the NWA was formed in 1948. The United States Attorney General declared the wrestling industry an *illegal conspiracy* in 1956, and Justice investigators had been watching ever since.

The details buried in these files paint a revealing history of the industry we know today as sports entertainment, but those details also document the *human* costs and casualties of this industry's development in the 1950s. Wrestling's real mayhem outside the ring came to official attention in April 1953 during the early months of the Eisenhower administration and pro wrestling's first television heyday starring Gorgeous George, Antonino Rocca and Buddy Rogers. The triggering event that captured Justice Department attention was a wrestling turf war in southern California between the NWA's regional office and several *outlaw* wrestlers and promoters who complained about the NWA's gangland tactics. Initially, Justice Department officials in Los Angeles focused on *the California combine,* a booking monopoly created in 1950 by four promoters (Los Angeles booker John Doyle, Olympic Auditorium promoter Alvah "Cal" Eaton, Ocean Park Arena owner and promoter Mike Hirsch and Hollywood and San Diego promoter Hugh Nichols) who controlled arena and TV wrestling in southern California, Las Vegas, Phoenix and Tucson. Of the four California partners, Doyle and Nichols held NWA membership but all four split booking fees among themselves for both arena and TV shows.

At the heart of the 1953 wrestling war in California was a fight over TV revenue. Shortly after the combine was formed, it engineered a

wrestlers' strike of television wrestling shows in southern California by encouraging wrestlers to demand a portion of the TV revenue. In reality, the wrestlers' strike was a *work* - manipulated by the combine to force renegotiation of its TV contracts and, ultimately, to remove competing TV wrestling shows as a condition of the new contract. The five-week *worked* strike was "settled" after local stations offered $2,000 for each TV show and agreed to limit the number of wrestling shows televised. The drive by the NWA's California combine to tie up TV wrestling brought complaints from *outlaw* competitors Frank Pasquale, who promoted at the South Gate Arena, and Nick Lutze, a former wrestler who booked the Pasadena Arena and other promoters who operated in Santa Ana, the Wilmington Bowl, Valley Garden and Pomona.

Since the NWA combine controlled wrestlers' bookings, it refused to provide independent promoters with talent for either arena or TV shows and threatened wrestlers with blacklisting if they worked for *outlaw* promotions. When the independent promoters applied for NWA membership, they were refused because the NWA already had two members in Los Angeles - Doyle and Nichols. And when the independent promoters established their own booking office by recruiting NWA wrestlers Sandor Szabo and Hardy Kruskamp to run it, the NWA combine promptly hired Szabo to star as its champion in a made-for-TV series "Beat The Champ." When independent promoter Nick Lutze arranged for his own TV show in 1953, the combine retaliated with its own show to force Lutze off the air; at the same time, the NWA's John Doyle sent a *blacklist* of 14 wrestlers who worked for Lutze to NWA headquarters in St. Louis for national circulation. A few weeks later, Lutze's TV show was canceled by the station and the California combine dropped its Pomona show that had competed with it.

Shortly later, the California combine self-destructed from its monopoly success. By now, its annual TV revenue was $500,000 and its TV shows from the Hollywood Legion Stadium were telecast on more than 100 stations throughout the country, but Doyle and Nichols argued with Eaton and Hirsch over distribution of profits. When the internal dispute about money couldn't be resolved, its two NWA members, Doyle and Nichols, withheld wrestlers and NWA champion Lou Thesz from Eaton's Olympic Auditorium; outraged, Eaton applied for NWA membership but was turned down. Later in the year, Doyle and Nichols made peace with Eaton,

agreeing to provide Eaton with NWA wrestlers for 45% of Eaton's gates and 10% of his TV money. But the uneasy partnership did not last long and a year later, Doyle sold his interest in the combine to his three partners (Nichols, Eaton and Hirsch) who formed a new regional monopoly, California Wrestling Office, Inc. Doyle's departure from the combine was costly - he gave up lucrative managerial contracts with Mr. Moto (Charles Iwamoto) and Baron Michelle Leone (Mike Leone), and was required to agree not to book or promote or televise wrestling in competition with the NWA for 22 months.

After Doyle left the NWA's California office, Eaton was admitted to NWA membership but had trouble getting *Mr. Moto* and *Baron Leone* to submit to his contractual control, assigned to him in the deal with Doyle; Eaton threatened Moto and Baron Leone with *blacklisting* if they didn't cooperate. In the meantime, John Doyle's attorney told Doyle his non-compete agreement with the California combine was illegal, and Doyle returned to wrestling promotion as an NWA *outlaw* in 1955. By now, however, Doyle's withdrawal from the NWA caused his supply of wrestlers to dry up and the boys *who* dared to work with Doyle - *Tony "Elephant Boy" Olivas, Peppi Pasquale, Mr. Moto, Brother Frank Jares* - were blacklisted by the NWA; another Doyle wrestler, Dr. Lee Grable, was hired away by the NWA for $200 a week. At about this time in 1955, John Doyle (who was years later Jim Barnett's partner in Australia and elsewhere) also contacted the Justice Department and agreed to secretly *inform* on his former NWA colleagues while he continued to try promote as an *outlaw.*

Justice Department files show that Doyle's cooperation as an informant was instrumental in documenting the California combine's illegality, Cal Eaton's corruption of the state athletic commission and the NWA's blacklisting and blocking tactics directed at Doyle and other *outlaw* promoters in California. And John Doyle was hardly the only whistleblower from inside The Business; in time, there were many more and together, they revealed the California combine was just one *family* in the entire NWA syndicate - just one spoke on a larger wheel that extended throughout the United States. Shortly afterward, FBI agents spread out around the country to investigate the *national* wrestling monopoly. When they probed further, they found *"a major, overall national conspiracy by the National Wrestling Alliance and three other local conspiracies"* in Texas, Eastern Pennsylvania

and Maryland and a Southern Wrestling Alliance that organized bookers and promoters in Virginia, West Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

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By the time the Justice Department's investigation of the wrestling industry was finished, the industry's trail of illegal conduct was traced back to July 1948 when five Midwestern wrestling promoters gathered at the President Hotel in Waterloo, Iowa to discuss their mutual problems with business competitors. Each of the promoters - Orville Brown of Kansas City, Missouri, Max Clayton of Omaha, P. L. "Pinky" George of Des Moines, Sam Muchnick of St. Louis and Tony Stecher of Minneapolis - already booked wrestling shows in specific geographical areas, but they shared the *problem* of promotional competitors. Of the five, none faced more intense competition than Muchnick whose St. Louis promotion competed with a promotional group operated by Lou Thesz and his father Martin, and their partners Bill Longson, Eddie Quinn and Frank Tunney. When Muchnick encountered intense competition from Thesz for the St. Louis wrestling market, other Midwestern promoters agreed to send Muchnick their wrestlers and withhold talent from Thesz. Muchnick agreed to reciprocate, and the five promoters became exclusive bookers and provincial bosses of wrestling shows in the Midwest. To profit on a big scale, the Midwestern promoters decided to form a wrestling cartel which they named National Wrestling Alliance.

In addition to the five Midwestern promoters' competition problems, they shared the view that wrestling's popularity suffered from the nagging public relations posed by multiple world champions. They decided public confidence in wrestling would be enhanced if there was just one world champion, and they agreed to recognize one champion in two weight classes, initially, and to rotate the champions' appearances in their territories. They promised each other not to pay the world heavyweight champion more than 10% of the gates, and they established a policy that whenever a wrestler was selected to be their champion, he would be required to post "*a substantial amount of money in escrow to be held as*

forfeit insurance . . . so that the champions will not run out or refuse to defend their title," said the minutes of the Waterloo meeting. In other words, without a huge cash *security deposit* on the title, no wrestler would be willing to give the championship belt back when the time came to lose it to another guy. After deciding their first heavyweight champion would be Orville Brown and Billy Goelz their junior heavyweight champion, the five promoters asked Brown for $5,000 and Goelz for $1,000 as security deposits. And because they didn't want Brown to appear as both their champion and Kansas City booker, Brown's brother in law was designated as *front man* for Brown's promotion. Internally, NWA members referred to Brown with the codename "Wallace" (for Wallace, Kansas, his hometown) to further hide Brown's involvement in the promotion's ownership.

The five provincial bosses formalized the NWA's objectives in a written agreement they all signed on July 18, 1948, an agreement that contained three illegal, anti-competitive provisions - allocating exclusive promotional rights in specified regions without competition from other promoters, protection of the specified regions by promoters in other regions and a collective agreement to blacklist troublesome wrestlers in all regions. Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before other wrestling promoters around the country recognized that joining the NWA's syndicate would protect their promotions against competition (*rogues* and *outlaws,* in their view), and NWA membership grew quickly. Three months after the Waterloo meeting, the NWA's first powerplay was attempted when NWA members brought Muchnick and his St. Louis competitor Lou Thesz together at a Chicago hotel to make peace. At that meeting, Muchnick told Thesz he would close his own booking office in exchange for working as Thesz's PR man and offered to sign a five-year contract with Thesz for $15,000 a year; but Thesz refused, telling Muchnick he would run him out of business in a year. In the months afterward, however, Muchnick's promotion did well with help from his NWA friends, especially after he booked Buddy Rogers (Herman Rhode) through Jack Pfefer, an NWA enemy for many years who controlled Rogers' bookings.

Thirteen more regional promoters joined the NWA in 1949, and after Thesz's St. Louis promotion began to feel the pinch, he agreed to merge his office with Muchnick's in exchange for the NWA world *strap,* 10% of the gates (and returning 2% to Muchnick) and an office job for his father

Martin. After Thesz appeared before NWA members and promised to "*abide by the decisions of the Alliance,"* a match with NWA champion Orville Brown was scheduled to switch the belt. In the meantime, the NWA upped the heavyweight champion's security deposit to $10,000 and designated Muchnick as the champion's booking agent. But the Thesz-Brown title match never came off because Brown was seriously injured in an automobile accident a month before the scheduled bout, and shortly later, the NWA declared Thesz world champion. To hide Lou's co-ownership of the St. Louis promotion, he was given the codename *"Shoemaker"* which masked his identity in the NWA's internal correspondence. All in all, it was a creative and mutually lucrative solution to the St. Louis turf war of the late 1940s.

The NWA grew in size and power in the early 1950s. By 1956, NWA membership included 38 regional promotions that controlled every wrestling booking office of any size in the nation, three in Canada, one in Mexico and Hawaii. At the time, the NWA provided wrestlers for at least 500 regularly scheduled (usually, weekly) wrestling shows in the U.S. and hundreds of *spot* shows. Sam Muchnick, who succeeded P. L. "Pinky" George as NWA president in 1950 and remained in office for almost 20 years, proudly told the Justice Department the NWA *controlled wrestlers for 95% of regular arena wrestling shows and all televised shows,* and NWA members' gross earnings exceeded $25,000,000 annually in the mid-1950s - *about $167 million in 2002 dollars.*

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But those millions of dollars were unlawfully gained, the Justice Department concluded. For one thing, the NWA's illegal agreement to not furnish wrestlers to non-members enabled each NWA territorial promoter to establish a local wrestling monopoly; the power to withhold wrestlers meant non-NWA members were cut off from the NWA's control over virtually every wrestler in the country. Justice Department evidence showed that independent (non-NWA) promoters in at least forty American cities during the 1950s were stopped by an NWA member who *owned* the territory. When NWA territorial promoters encountered competition, they

notified Muchnick who solved the problem by cutting off the supply of wrestlers and the NWA's *chokehold* on booking offices was so fierce that it withstood challenges from at least five state athletic commissions - in Arizona, Illinois, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

The NWA's second illegal agreement, that NWA members would support each other in struggles with competitors, supplemented their first agreement. The Justice investigation located examples of how this practice facilitated the NWA monopoly: NWA promoters withheld wrestlers from *outlaw* promoter Ted Thye of Portland; the NWA *killed* an *opposition* promotion run by California promoter Nick Lutze in 1953; the NWA helped its member Fred Kohler of Chicago when local promoters matched local *babyfaces* with his TV stars and had local wrestlers beat them (Kohler told the Justice Department he joined the NWA to prevent local promoters from "misusing" his TV stars); the NWA rescued Houston promoter Morris Siegel when he encountered competition from *outlaw* promoter Sterling "Dizzy" Davis in 1950 by blacklisting wrestlers and persuading the nation's leading gate attraction Gorgeous George to no-show; in another Houston incident, the NWA ordered guest referee Jack Dempsey to no-show an appearance for *outlaw* Davis, who finally quit promoting after his house burned down; three years later, the NWA again rescued Siegel when *outlaw* Dallas promoter Ed McLemore produced competing wrestling films for television - this time, McLemore's Sportatorium in Dallas was burned down.

But the Justice Department was especially revolted by the human consequences of the NWA's third Waterloo agreement - to *control wrestlers through blacklisting.* One internal Justice Department memo wrote: " *Wrestlers are afraid that if they work for nonmembers that members won t employ them. This fear is real, and constitutes one of the major reasons why it is necessary to break up the NWA."* On this point, the extent of NWA blacklisting, Justice Department and FBI evidence is as heartbreaking today as it must have been for those lives and livelihoods it ruined many years ago: *between 1949 and 1955, the NWA blacklisted dozens of wrestlers:*

One of the first was wrestler *Andy Rockne,* blacklisted by NWA Chicago promoter Fred Kohler after Rockne worked for an *opposition* promoter; later, Kohler had Rockne beaten by Orville Brown. In late 1949, *Billy Wolfe* was blacklisted by NWA Atlanta promoter Paul Jones for booking women wrestlers in Georgia and at least another 38 wrestlers were blacklisted in 1950, including: *Scotty Knielsen*, blacklisted for leaving the Tennessee territory *without permission,* wrestler *Joe "Killer"*Christy met the same fate when he left Michigan and twelve other wrestlers (Sterling "Dizzy" Davis, Juan Humberto, Sockeye Jack McDonald, Paul Murdock, Ivan Kameroff, Zebra Kid, George Bruckman, Bill Sledge, Bill Steddum, Jim Londos, Gene Stanlee and Joe Kameroff) were blacklisted after they worked in opposition to the NWA's Morris Siegel in Houston (Justice Department files indicate that Gene Stanlee was blacklisted twice - first, in 1949 and 1950 when he worked for Sterling Davis and again in the 1953 to 1954 period when Stanlee worked for another Siegel competitor). A few months later in 1950, when NWA Chicago promoter Fred Kohler encountered opposition, Kohler blacklisted twenty-four other wrestlers (Jim Londos, Ivan Rasputin, Great Vinca, Jack Kennedy, Mickey Gold, Roy McLarity, Kiman Kudo, Walter Achue, Golden Hawk, Irish Mike McGee, Jack Guy, Fred Bozic, Chief Don Eagle, Argentina Rocca, Frankie Talaber, Jackie Nichols, Danny McShane, Sonny Kurgis, Bad Boy Brown, Jack Garibaldi, Omar Kyam, Doug Henderson, John Pesek and his son and Cowboy Wright).

Justice Department files also show the NWA's own lawyer warned NWA members in 1951 that blacklisting was illegal and recommended the practice be stopped; afterward, NWA members voted to *officially* repeal their blacklisting clause but agreed privately to continue doing it - but less visibly by exchanging postcards on which blacklisted wrestlers' names were written in *red ink.* Later that year, the NWA blacklisted *Lord Carlton* (accused of working for an NWA competitor in Montreal) and *Pancho Valentino* (for *running out* on the NWA's El Paso promoter Sam Menacker). Eventually, the *red-ink-method* proved cumbersome and NWA members returned to their earlier procedure of distributing the blacklist through the mail. In 1952, the NWA blacklisted at least five more wrestlers: *Johnny Carlin, Abe Stein, Al Baffert, Primo Carnera and Henry Harrell* (who was blacklisted after he not only refused to lose but defeated NWA junior heavyweight champion Danny McShane in Nashville). A year later in 1953,

woman wrestler June Byers asked the NWA to reinstate the blacklisting of *Mildred Burke* who was blacklisted earlier for wrestling with an NWA competitor in New Jersey; later the same year, *Cowboy Carlson* was blacklisted by Muchnick for no-showing in Muchnick's territory and the California combine blacklisted an *entire troupe* of wrestlers who worked for an*outlaw* TV show; the same year, Detroit's NWA booker Harry Light blacklisted three midget wrestlers - *Irish Jackie, Sonny Boy Cassidy and Farmer Pete* - because they "ran out on their bookings."

Justice Department files show the NWA's blacklist got even longer in 1953 and 1954 when Texas promoter Morris Siegel submitted seven more names *(Dizzy Davis, Danny Savich, Honest John Cretoria, Tarzan White, Al Massey, Frankie Murdoch and Antone "Ripper" Leone)* during his promotional war with Ed McLemore. At about this time, blacklisted Frankie Murdoch (father of second generation wrestler *Dick Murdoch)* wrote to the NWA's Muchnick "to see if there is something I have done to be in bad with the National Wrestling Alliance;" Muchnick did not respond. Justice files also contain a defiant letter written by blacklisted *Antone "Ripper" Leone* to Morris Siegel, an assertion of Ripper's free agency and declaration he intended to work for whomever he pleased. Twelve other wrestlers were blacklisted in 1954 because they worked for a competitor to the NWA's Roy Welch, booker for Tennessee and Alabama - *Nick Carter, Tarzan White, Leo Jensen, Farmer Brown and Hillbilly Spanky, Helen Blazes, Bertha Smith, Buddy LaRosa, Joe Cassins, Floyd Red Bird, Elmer Davis and Dick Lever.* Two other wrestlers (boxer-turned-wrestler *Primo Carnera* and his manager- wrestler *Hardy Kruskamp)* were threatened with blacklisting after working with an NWA competitor. Then there was this: after the NWA's Chicago promoter Fred Kohler made Verne Gagne the *United States* heavyweight champion for WGN-TV and the DuMont TV network, NWA champ Lou Thesz refused to wrestle in Kohler's territory; in response, Kohler threatened to blacklist *any wrestlers who appeared on the undercards at shows where Thesz wrestled.* According to the files, Kohler told Sam Muchnick that Thesz's *boycott* of Kohler's territory *"may affect his income considerably, as it is possible some wrestlers may be reluctant to wrestle in some cities that Lou Thesz does wrestle in."*

At about this time in 1954, the NWA adopted another method to circulate its blacklists in 1954: the *telephone.* In an attempt to remove its

incriminating trail of paper, NWA boss Muchnick recommended that members not book any wrestler *"until you know*

that he has definitely been released from his previous territory" by calling that territorial promoter and listening for a brief and simple - "No."

The Justice Department's long look at the wrestling business in the 1950s relied on the usual methods of criminal investigation - FBI interviews, cultivating informants and seizing documents, including personal correspondence among NWA members. One such revealing series of letters is an exchange between NWA boss Sam Muchnick and former NWA member John Doyle. At the time, Doyle was trying to book wrestlers for *outlaw* promoters in California but was told by the wrestlers (including *Mr. Moto, Peppi Pasquale* and *Brother Frank Jares* - father of Joe Jares who wrote *Whatever Happened Gorgeous George?)* they'd be blacklisted if they worked for him. Doyle wrote Muchnick, saying: *"These wrestlers badly need work but are afraid to accept any work . . .for fear of recriminations from you and your Alliance. The extreme, often absurd, lengths some of these frightened wrestlers go to avoid any contact with me give eloquent testimony of how modern day wrestlers are held captive through fear."* Doyle asked Muchnick to "give permission to unemployed, rejected wrestlers to work for [independent promoters] without subjecting the wrestlers to *the usual punishment* applied to men wrestling for promoters not booked by a member of the National Wrestling Alliance." And Doyle added, "Being a former member of the [National Wrestling] Alliance in attendance at all the meetings, *I am well aware of the aims and purposes of the organization.* With this knowledge, I am aware of the futility and absurdity of any appeal to you to retreat or deviate one iota from the stand you and your Alliance has taken and maintained since it attained its stature as a coast to coast and border to border Colossus." Justice Department files contain Muchnick's angry reply, accusing Doyle of inventing the *red card method* of blacklisting. Muchnick wrote: *"While a member of the NWA, you* [Doyle] *wanted the organization to exercise super control* of wrestlers and promoters, and now that you are no longer a

member by your own choosing, you start to tell how terrible a body the NWA is. Be a good sport and stop throwing rocks."

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NWA blacklisting continued into 1955 when Pinky George asked Muchnick to blacklist *Jerry Wood* and *Man Mountain Dean, Jr.* who worked for a George competitor in Iowa. Another wrestler blacklisted that year was *Lou Plummer* in an action instigated by El Paso promoter Sam Menacker. That same year, Wild Red (Ralph) Berry was threatened with blacklisting if he worked for McLemore's *outlaw* promotion in Dallas, and *Argentine Rocca* (then under contract with Mondt and Kohler who took two-thirds of Rocca's money) was threatened with losing his TV appearances if he worked for Doyle in Las Vegas. Another wrestler booked for Doyle's Vegas show was *Verne Gagne,* who escaped NWA blacklisting when he no-showed the Vegas booking because his "wife was in the hospital."

Later that year, the NWA attempted to blacklist two California wrestling referees, an action that backfired, bringing political scandal and damaging publicity. When the NWA's Los Angeles promoter Cal Eaton, related by marriage to California Gov. Goodwin Knight, learned that referee *Al Billings* had cooperated with the FBI, Eaton had the California Athletic Commission convene a disciplinary hearing for Billings where Billings was interrogated about his FBI conversations that were "detrimental to the [Knight] administration." When Billings refused to give details about these discussions, the California Athletic Commission permitted the NWA's Eaton to join their interrogation. Eaton simply asked Billings if he had talked with an FBI agent and when Billings said he had, Eaton sniffed, "That's all I wanted to know" and the hearing ended. Afterward, Billings telephoned the Justice Department, telling what happened at the hearing. But when Justice investigators asked Billings if he wanted their help, Billings said no - because, he said, it would then be easy for Eaton *to have a wrestler hurt him* or have one of the California commissioners revoke his referee license because of *bad judgment,* Billings emphasized Eaton's clout with the NWA California combine, saying that Eaton had the athletic

commission bar ringside doctors who refused to approve wrestlers, like *The Great Togo* who had flunked his physical exam but was permitted to wrestle anyway.

The California wrestling scandal worsened a few months later when state legislators investigated California's boxing and wrestling *syndicate.* Billings and other referees and wrestlers were subpoenaed to testify at legislative hearings, and when both Billings and referee Smokey Joe Woods admitted wrestling matches were *fixed,* their revelations made headlines around the country; days later, Billings and *Joe Woods* were fired by the combine, and they complained publicly. When the state legislative committee later met to hear the referees' claims of reprisals, seven NWA-affiliated promoters submitted a petition explaining that the referees had *"merely been sidelined for their own protection because their testimony had so inflamed the entire world of professional wrestling, including the fans, that the promoters could no longer guarantee these particular referees' safe conduct"* The NWA promoters said a group of wrestling fans tried to overturn Wood's car, and the NWA's Hugh Nichols had received telephone calls from NWA members as far away as Tulsa, St. Louis and New York reporting large slumps in wrestling attendance since the referees' testimony; Justice investigators concluded the NWA petition came from Sam Avey, Sam Muchnick and Toots Mondt. After the referees' blacklisting produced bad publicity, the California Commission reinstated Billings and Woods; a few months later, when media interest disappeared, Billings and Woods were quietly fired again.

One other wrestling business practice attracted Justice Department attention - its use of written contracts to *control* star performers. Although the NWA operated about 95% of American wrestling shows, fewer than 3% of wrestlers were under contract to the NWA. Some non-contract wrestlers were envious of the contract offers; other non-contract wrestlers saw the contracts for what they were - another *hook,* another way to control them - and contract wrestlers became known inside The Business to other wrestlers as *contract stooges.* After its investigation, the Justice Department took a

dim view of how wrestler contracts were used. For one thing, contract wrestlers were required to work only for NWA members and not wrestle anywhere without NWA permission, an agreement that prevented wrestlers working for nonmembers to achieve greater popularity. The Justice Department was *smart* to how wrestling was *worked* and it reasoned that since NWA bookers *fixed* the matches, they determined "in large part which wrestlers shall develop into name attractions;" at the same time, "if a wrestler wants to develop into a name attraction, he has to sign a management contract."

An internal Justice Department memo noted *the "evil means" by which wrestlers were "whipped into line."* Justice Department lawyers concluded such contracts had the effect of fixing wrestler compensation, which was illegal. The origin of the NWA's price-fixing was its agreement "not to pay any wrestler more than the champion" - originally 10% (of 80%) later increased to 12%, with two percent going to the NWA office; the fixed compensation of NWA champions illegally set a ceiling on other wrestlers' compensation. Another dimension of the NWA's illegal price-fixing was its agreement to enforce a minimum ticket price of $1 at championship matches, illegally fixing prices at NWA wrestling shows.

As Justice investigators probed further into pro wrestling's hidden economics, they stumbled onto the industry's peculiar bookkeeping practices - unrecorded kickbacks to "the newspaper boys" (as Evansville promoter Leon Balkin put it in one letter) often larger than wrestler *payoffs;* other unrecorded cash payments were delivered to star performers (like Lou Thesz) whose *payoffs* were supplemented by a cash "privilege," it was called. One of wrestling's slickest operators in double bookkeeping was Joe "Toots" Mondt (whose one Madison Square Garden show in 1953 produced a gate of $26,000 but a reported profit of $36.48; when Mondt's Manhattan Booking Office was later sold to Pedro Martinez, the company's books showed a profit of over $100,000 for the same year). But these accounting practices were not unusual in wrestling, which is why Sam Muchnick told Justice Department investigators not to look too closely at NWA promoters' tax returns, fearing an IRS audit of the entire industry.

The Justice Department was more interested in how pro wrestling's revenues were distributed. The investigation found that in 1955, NWA promoters across the country produced more than $25 million in arena

revenue and at least another five million dollars in TV revenue. In California alone, TV contracts for wrestling shows taped at the Olympic Auditorium, Ocean Park Arena and the Hollywood Legion Stadium produced revenues for the California combine of over $600,000 a year. At the time, the largest wrestling gate in California (or anywhere else in the country) was the 1955 outdoor show in Los Angeles that featured Lou Thesz and Baron Michelle Leone in the main event. That show drew $103,000 and although Lou Thesz got his 10%, most wrestlers on the card were paid as little as *twenty five dollars.* But even wrestling's stars were short-changed: Sam Muchnick admitted to Justice investigators that although Thesz was publicly credited with earning $150,000 a year, he was actually making a third of that; Chicago's Fred Kohler admitted his management contract with Antonino Rocca guaranteed Rocca $80,000 a year but after Kohler got his 20% and Mondt took his slice, all that Rocca got was $25,000 a year; and Los Angeles booker Babe McCoy, who had a management contract with Primo Carnera, admitted that although Camera's appearances produced $47,000 in one year, Carnera got only a third of that.

The Justice Department concluded that most star wrestlers (such as the NWA champions and Gorgeous George, Antonino Rocca, Mr. Moto, Wilbur Snyder, Bobo Brazil, Verne Gagne and others) blindly signed management contracts as a condition of their stardom, although some wrestlers objected to contractual control. One of these was the NWA's light heavyweight championship in 1953, Gypsy Joe. After being given the *strap*, Gypsy Joe decided he didn't like the NWA contract that went with it and he told his *booker* (Billy Goelz of the Chicago office) he wanted to *drop the strap* wherever and to whomever the NWA desired. Gypsy was sent to Ferris Field in Spokane, Washington where the world's light heavyweight championship changed hands about four months later. The new champion was Frank Stojack, an aging but famous collegiate athlete at Washington State College (now, WSU) who had political ambitions. Shortly after Stojack *won* the world championship (and signed his NWA contract), he was elected to the Tacoma City Council in a landslide vote; later, Stojack ran for Pierce county sheriff as "the champion of fair play" and was elected to that position, too. Another NWA champion refused to sign his contract for two years after he *won* it, and the NWA located another wrestler who could get the *strap* back in a *shoot.* When the NWA's junior heavyweight champion Baron Michelle Leone refused to sign, the NWA's Sam Muchnick

recommended in late 1954 that Cyclone Anaya was the logical candidate to get the belt back from the Baron in a *shoot;* but the Baron finally signed and the match with Anaya wasn't necessary.

In another case, the NWA's attempt to establish contractual control of a star attraction failed, even after blacklisting. Antone "Ripper" Leone's story was well known inside The Business because he told it to everybody he knew for many years. I became acquainted with Ripper in the mid-1980s after I kicked up dust on ABC-TV's *20/20,* and this is some of what he told me: "Before the National Wrestling Alliance was formed, I wrestled everywhere and made good money. In those days, the promoter got 5% and the wrestlers split 55%. A main event wrestler could make 10 to 15% of the gate, and in those days a top guy could earn between $75,000 and $100,000 a year if you didn't get injured. But after the NWA was organized, the top guys were put on contracts for about $300 a week. The *contract stooges* were secretive about their deals, but you could always tell who the contract guys were: they were the ones who *didn't* go out to *count the house.* Guys like Rocca weren't making $100,000 a year. He got $300 or $400 a week, and "Toots" Mondt used to sell him shares in the New York promotion. Rocca often said to me, Antone, I just bought another 20%.' Finally, I started asking him about it - ' Tony, you know it can't add up to more than 100%, and now you own 120%.' But they used him like all the others. He died broke. I refused to be a *contract stooge.* I wanted 10% of the house when I was the main event. And I tried to get other wrestlers to go along with me and stand up to this. I spoke up for the preliminary guys, because I was a preliminary guy once. *Unfortunately, wrestlers as a group have no courage.* I'd talk to them in the dressing room - 'Look there's a big house tonight, we should be getting $500 not $50' - but they were afraid that they'd be not working if they complained. After the [National Wrestling] Alliance formed, all the territories were bound together and the promoters spent a lot of time on the telephones. They'd blackball 'em.

"In the early 1950s television was great because it brought publicity. But in those days the TV stations paid promoters and the kinescopes were shown around the country. Wrestlers were told to sign releases and were paid $35. I said, 'Hell no, I want 10%.' As a result, there aren't many tapes of my matches. When I refused to accept $300 a week, Fred Kohler and Ed White in Chicago offered me one of the better contracts at that time - $750

a week plus a split, which was a share of the week's net gates minus $750. Well, that might come to $1,000 a week but my hotel and travel expenses were nearly that because I was going from Chicago to Los Angeles, from Los Angeles to Miami, from Miami to Montreal. I'd have maybe $900 in plane fares and hotels. So my share would be about $1,000 with about $900 in expenses. I refused to take it because it was dishonest and I told them so. Told all the promoters what I thought. Wrote them letters. Wrote to the Justice Department. The promoters hated me, of course." Ripper encouraged other wrestlers to join him in his fight against the NWA's wrestling monopoly and to cooperate, as he did, with the Justice Department's investigation. But other wrestlers feared the consequences of their defiance. Ripper did not, and he became, in his own words, *the scourge of the Alliance* with his complaining letters sent to both the NWA's Muchnick and the Justice Department.

Ripper talked about his Pacific Northwest tour in 1952: " I joined the circuit of Seattle, Tacoma, Bremerton, Olympia, Yakima, Bellingham and Vancouver. After a month, I sold out the Seattle Civic Auditorium for a match with the Masked Marvel (Buddy Knox). Before the match I went out to count the house as usual, and I went back to the dressing room. 'Listen, Buddy,' I said, 'This is a $18,000 sellout and our first show, and we can have 12 more sellouts provided that you don't beat me.' See, if you beat the villain, that's the end of the *heat.* End of the *program.* People want to come and see the villain beat. And so long as the villain isn't beaten, they'll keep coming back. He said, 'You're right, Antone. We could make a lot of money here.' So we *worked* where we were both fighting on the top rope and both hit the floor. There was no conclusion to the match. We both got back in the ring too late. Counted out. So, there was the rematch right there. But when they gave me my *payoff it* was $750. I said, 'Oh no, I want $1,500 minimum. I told them to keep the money and think about it and settle with me next week. But the next week, it was the same $750. I quit and went back to California. I didn't intend to wrestle in California, but I had been a big card there so Hugh Nichols and John Doyle asked me to work again. I told them what I wanted - 10% of the gates, and Nichols said, 'Any wrestler who won't take $750 doesn't deserve to be in there.' So I said, 'The hell with you Hugh Nichols and I quit there, too. That was it. So I went overseas to South Africa, Greece, all of Europe. When I wrestled in France, the local promoter showed me a telegram from the NWA: DON'T

BOOK ANTONE LEONE. Those telegrams followed me to England, Germany, Australia and New Zealand. I couldn't earn a nickel in wrestling and I didn't for the next twenty years," Ripper said.

Ripper returned to his home in Locust Island, New York where he wrote letters and made telephone calls to wrestling promoters. Justice Department files show that in 1956, he wrote to Muchnick, offering the NWA a deal: that he would withhold publication of his wrestling memoirs which promised to *expose the business* in exchange for cash payment from the NWA. Muchnick replied in writing, "If your purpose was merely an attempt to extort money from the National Wrestling Alliance for silence concerning some vague and fanciful charges you may make, you are hereby advised that such an attempt will not succeed so long as I am President or a member of the Alliance." Ripper pursued Muchnick with more letters. A month before the Justice Department's consent judgment was entered in 1956, he wrote Muchnick: "The entire wrestling world has been sealed to me. I cannot get any bookings. I know that the Alliance members have bonded together to *prevent me from making a living as a professional wrestler.* I do not beg for work nor do I seek charity [but] since 1950, I have not been able to earn a decent living wage. *Why am I not able to earn a living in wrestling? Why has my family been starving and going for six years without?* Have my past actions been so serious that the Alliance has endorsed an international boycott on my services? I feel that I must use my time spent in wrestling to my advantage and as I am no longer, as a free born American, able to pursue the profession that I chose long ago in my youth, *I have no alternative but to write about my years in wrestling.* I simply request that you contact the Alliance members on this subject: *Do you men wish to buy my material?* And Leone made his proposed deal explicit: *"I want to receive a just lump sum for my story and I will never write another."*

The NWA's Muchnick refused to pay Ripper for his silence, but he did not publish his threatened exposé. He wrestled occasionally in the late 1950s in a couple territories that would book him, but he could not work often enough to make a living in wrestling. Instead, he moved to California where he started a carpet cleaning business. And he continued to write long, angry letters to NWA promoters and the Department of Justice. Years later, former NWA member Sam (Frank) Menacker talked about the Ripper Leone case.

"*Antone was treated very, very badly. Very badly. He got the rawest deal of anyone in The Business. He wasn 't just bitching about his money. He was speaking up for everybody.* He wanted *all* the boys to make more money. However, when he went to speak to the promoters, all the wrestlers were afraid to back him up. So the promoters got together and blackballed him. They said, 'Don't book him!' And they put him out of business. They kept him from working. They blackballed him completely," Menacker said. Eventually, Ripper Leone sold his carpet cleaning operation and bought a pizza restaurant in Lynwood, California. Until he died in 1994, he remained proud of the stand he took against the mat monopoly and he maintained friendships with many wrestlers of his day through the Cauliflower Alley Club, from Freddie Blassie to Fabulous Moolah (Lilian Ellison). His acquired wealth was well known in the wrestling community, and lots of the *boys* who encountered hard times arranged for loans (that turned out to be gifts). Antone didn't seem to mind and he knew he was a soft touch because he was still angry about the years he lost to the blacklist. Antone "Ripper" Leone is the only former wrestler I knew who died rich - but his wealth was made by his own wits and guts *outside* The Business and *in spite of The* Business. Antone "Ripper" Leone was one of wrestling's rare principled heroes and I miss talking with him. Ripper passed away at age 78 in 1994.

The United States Attorney General announced the Justice Department's legal action against the wrestling business on a crisp October morning in 1956. Herbert Brownell, Jr. told the nation's press that the National Wrestling Alliance and its member promoters had been investigated and charged with *monopolization of professional wrestling by blacklisting, boycotting, coercion and other illegal tactics.* The Justice Department identified 35 present and past NWA member promoters as co-conspirators - Sam Avey, Paul Bowser, Orville Brown, Max Clayton, Jim Crockett, Rudy Dusek, Cal Eaton, Rod Fenton, P.L. Pinky George, Joe Gunther, Al Haft, Tex Hager, Paul Jones, Al Karasick, Fred Kohler, Bill Lewis, Harry Light, Mike London, C.P. "Cowboy" Luttrall, LeRoy McGuirk, Joe Malcewicz, *Pedro Martinez,* Cliff Maupin, Joe "Toots" Mondt, Sam Muchnick, Hugh Nichols, Don Owen, Dave Reynolds, Karl

“Doc” Sarpolis, Leonard Schwartz, Morris P. Siegel, Dennis Stecher, Billy Watson, Roy Welch and Billy Wolfe. As Pedro Martinez admitted to me years later, his name was right there in the middle of wrestling’s cabal. Conspicuously absent from the list of conspirators was Jack Pfefer, who had been excluded from NWA membership, and John Doyle and Sam (Frank) Menacker, who cooperated with the Justice investigation as informants.

When I finally got my hands on the 3,000 pages of investigation files in 1975 and studied the contents, I took a more careful look at the 35 signatures on the consent decree. One famous wrestling name that should have been on the list of defendants wasn't there - the signature of Lou Thesz. One wonders why, since the Feds' investigation showed that good old Lou - the acclaimed wrestling icon and by his own measure, a great man - was as much a part of the NWA's unlawful conspiracy as any of the 35 defendants. Maybe his name's absence from the list of co-conspirators is explainable by the fact that, technically, he was not an NWA member - his promotional partner Sam Muchnick was the official NWA member and public *front man* for the St. Louis office. Although everybody in the NWA knew about the St. Louis ownership arrangement, Lou's co-ownership with Muchnick was hidden from the public - he was just a phantom *shoemaker.* And when the Justice Department drafted its final list of co-conspirators, apparently none of the other defendants complained that one of their main *fallguys* hadn't been rightfully included. Maybe NWA members felt they had already exploited him enough.

For that reason, I don't want to be too hard on Lou because he also was shamelessly used and abused by the National Wrestling Alliance, a phoney and dishonest kingdom whose public crown he wore for many years. In light of Lou's skills, he *should* have been the highest paid guy in The Business but according to the Justice Department, his reported wrestling income (not including profits from his St. Louis partnership with Muchnick) for 1955 was $52,000 which doesn't seem possible for a guy who worked 170 nights a year for ten percent of the net gross; of course, there were many times like the evening of May 2, 1955 when Lou wrestled for NWA promoter Pinky George in Minot, North Dakota where the show's net was $694.00 and Lou's ten percent was $69 plus transportation of $36.54; or the next night in Minneapolis where the net gate was $2,783 with $278 to Thesz and $10 for transportation. Eventually, Lou parted company with the NWA through wrestling's equivalent of irreconcilable differences after dropping the *strap* to Dick Hutton for $25,000, according to Dan Parker; a year later, Lou went to California where he was booked by his old friend Jules Strongbow. Nonetheless, Lou's name occupies a prominent place in Justice Department documents, and when Lou wrote his

autobiography a few years ago, he briefly mentioned the NWA's history of legal troubles without divulging his own role in them. The old *shoemaker* may not have known the Justice Department investigation implicated him in several of the NWA's illegal practices.

For one thing, Lou was in some respects responsible for the NWA's formation because of his St. Louis turf war with Sam Muchnick before the NWA was established. The reason Muchnick joined Pinky George and other Midwestern promoters was to get help in crushing Thesz as a competitor. Later, the new NWA's clout was enough to force a promotional peace between Thesz and Muchnick, and their St. Louis partnership made money for both of them: a few months later, Muchnick was elected NWA president with his partner Thesz the NWA's world champion; Muchnick got a cut of Lou's earnings on the NWA's expanding circuit and Lou's daddy was given a job in the wrestling office. Secondly, and more significant, Justice Department files show that Thesz willingly conspired with NWA members to kill *outlaw* promotions. With Muchnick's hand on *the pencil,* Lou's bookings were often arranged specifically for certain cities where his world championship match would help the local NWA promoter fight a turf war with a competitor. On these occasions, and there were many of them in the 1950s, the appearance of world champion Lou Thesz was a business bullet to be fired, one of the cards to be played to protect NWA members from honest promotional competition. For example, when Muchnick's old Texas friend Morris Siegel encountered competition in 1949 from renegade promoter Dizzy Davis who had booked Gorgeous George, it was Thesz who contacted Gorgeous George's manager John Doyle to get George's appearance canceled. Lou performed the same predatory role in 1951 during another promotional dispute in Lancaster, Pennsylvania involving Eddie Quinn and "Toots" Mondt when Lou was sent in to *kill* the NWA's *opposition*; when the NWA's Morris Siegel was fighting another Texas promotional war in 1953, Lou wrestled for Siegel on ten occasions during a 16- month promotional fight and Lou's help to *kill* competition in Texas continued into the next year when he appeared on shows in San Antonio and Houston. Lou's appearances in Chicago were manipulated to kill the cross-town competition of the NWA's Fred Kohler; the same was true in Los Angeles, where Muchnick, Doyle and Nichols kept Lou from appearing at Eaton's Olympic Auditorium. Justice Department files contain correspondence between Muchnick and Thesz showing the two of them

shared reports about other NWA turf wars, such as the NWA's problems in Baltimore in June 1954 when independent promoters complained about Joe "Toots" Mondt, or when Muchnick instructed Thesz to wrestle in Oregon and Washington for the NWA's Don Owen who was struggling against *outlaw* promoter Ted Thye in 1955. There is no evidence that Lou ever objected to his *hitman* role (except wrestling against legit tough guy Roy Dunn in a *shoot)* but he did refuse to work shows that featured women wrestlers and midgets and even then, he complained only about wrestling more than three nights a week (and never on Saturday, unless he got Mondays off). Naturally, world champion Lou usually got his way by drawing each NWA territorial member's biggest gates of the year because tickets were more expensive when Lou was on the show. The exploitation seemed mutual, which is why Lou sent each NWA member a set of beer glasses with his picture on them in 1954 at Christmastime. Lou Thesz became, in the words of Antone Ripper Leone, " the darling of the NWA."

At the same time, the Justice Department's legal analysis of the wrestling industry's economics and its paltry compensation of most wrestlers also implicated Lou Thesz. At the center of the NWA's price-fixing conspiracy - the illegal agreement not to pay any wrestler more than the champion's 10% - was Lou's quiet acquiescence to it. Although Lou deserved more than his 10% cut (plus travel expenses), Justice files show Lou's 10% set a ceiling on other wrestler *payoffs* (except for Gorgeous George, Buddy Rogers and the convoluted financial deal involving Antonino Rocca, "Toots" Mondt and Fred Kohler). Lou's only compassion for another wrestler's circumstances was reserved for Ed "Strangler" Lewis, his old friend of many years who at least got *prelim money* from the NWA on those wrestling shows where Lewis stumbled up to the ring as Lou's *manager.* But according to several wrestlers from that era, Lou repeatedly told promoters "never pay the other guys more than $100," a charge just as often denied by Lou. But the truth is that instead of speaking up for other wrestlers, Lou's only indignation over wrestler treatment was limited to his resentment of other star attractions, such as Baron Leone, Buddy Rogers and Antonino Rocca, who sold more tickets than Lou but couldn't wrestle as well; in an industry where *everything's a work,* Lou's jealous response was to *shoot* on them or refuse to lose to them.

Finally, Justice Department files also show that a double standard for NWA membership was applied to new applicants, a double standard that benefitted Lou Thesz and no one else. The files show that good old Lou was silent when the NWA refused membership in 1955 to Rod Fenton because he was a wrestler *and promoter.* Of course, everybody in the NWA knew about Lou's twin roles as wrestler *and* promoter in the St. Louis promotion with Muchnick, but Lou didn't say a word to protest the obvious discrimination. Eventually, Lou not only left the NWA but he tried to promote against it with his own *outlaw* promotion. Pro wrestling does funny things to people.

News of the Justice Department's action against the wrestling business was reported by the nation's newspapers: the NWA *had* been organized as an illegal monopoly whose power was exercised by a cartel of about three dozen regional provincial bosses who obliterated competitors and controlled wrestlers through contract *stretchings* and blacklisting. Although wrestling fans might not have known the difference between the Sherman Act and a Sherman tank, the inference to be drawn from wrestling's legal troubles was clear: *there was something sleazy about the wrestling business after all.*

Instead of fighting the Justice Department, like boxing did (in another famous antitrust case), NWA members quickly agreed to cease their unlawful business practices and labor relations. Their signatures on the consent judgment had the *intended* effect of dissolving the National Wrestling Alliance as an *unlawful combination in restraint of trade.* Although denying wrongdoing publicly, NWA members promised to adopt new bylaws, cease allocating exclusive territorial promoters, and stop boycotting and embargoing wrestlers. *New York Mirror* columnist Dan Parker congratulated the wrestling industry: *"Forced into a corner, this group of fakes told the truth for the first time in their lives"* But Justice Department files also show the NWA was a captive defendant, willing to do anything to avoid trial publicity which would inevitably include the nationally transmitted revelation that pro wrestling was *worked* - wasn't a

real contest. That is the only reason why, Sam Muchnick told Justice attorneys, the NWA would not fight the suit in court. Muchnick also tried to get Justice attorneys to discourage IRS interest in wrestling, fearing a close look at promoters' tax returns and discovery that much of pro wrestling's loot was off the books in its shadow economy. Muchnick was so nervous about bad publicity he tried to talk the Attorney General into not announcing the Justice Department's action. Muchnick's request actually was considered at headquarters, but ultimately rejected because it was feared the nation's sportswriters would accuse the Justice Department of a cover-up. When the Justice Department refused to keep the consent judgment secret, Muchnick asked the Attorney General to hold his press conference on a weekend in Iowa when and where it wouldn't attract much attention; the Justice Department said no.

A few months after the consent decree was announced, Muchnick received a letter from Wladek Zbyszko, the retired wrestling brother of Stanislaus: "I am ready for the second act, then of course will come the third and final act and that will be the burial of the stiff" Zbyszko claimed some credit for the Justice Department's action against "crooks and fakers," and warned Muchnick that his [Zbyszko's] life's ambition was to correct wrestling's abuses, asserting "may the best man win." Another letter to Muchnick came from blacklisted wrestler Antone "Ripper" Leone, who wrote: "I fervently pray that sickness, poverty and disease descends upon all of the National Wrestling Alliance, and I wish that every contract and gutless wrestler that made you bums possible will hear this same fate. May the increasing days bring sorrow, misery, pain and abject slavery to all of you. I call upon God to place this curse upon each of you for every dollar that was stolen from me and my family"

The NWA's retrenchment after the 1956 consent decree was painful, and members argued among themselves about dissolving the organization once and for all. Some quit, saying there was no longer any point in belonging to the Alliance, and the NWA's roster of provincial bosses dwindled. Muchnick complained to Justice attorneys for several years afterward that

the consent decree was killing the membership and hurting business because of *increased competition.* Justice attorneys amused each other by reading Muchnick's possibly sincere protests, which showed he still didn't understand monopoly and restraint of trade even though he'd been caught at it. The *Daily Mirror* chronicled the NWA's internal machinations. "It is a well known fact," wrote Dan Parker, "that there is more intrigue connected with professional wrestling than anything else but communism and television. *Wrestling promoters hold their conventions on spiral staircases with coats of mail under their shirts as protection against back-stabbing.*"

When the consent judgment against the NWA was signed, Justice Department attorneys said, "We intend to follow developments in professional wrestling closely, with a view to indicting or bringing contempt actions should it ever again appear that the Federal antitrust laws are being violated in any significant respect." But the Justice Department soon lost interest in wrestling's monopoly despite the trickle of continuing complaints about NWA boycotts, blocking and blacklisting. During the 19 years between 1956 and 1975, when I first talked to Justice investigators, additional complaints about the NWA's illegal conduct were dutifully stamped and filed at Justice headquarters but generally ignored. And without enforcement of the consent decree, the NWA's *illegal conspiracy* continued.

A few months later in early 1957 a wrestler's wife contacted the Justice Department to complain that the NWA was violating the consent judgment. She reported that her unnamed husband had been blacklisted by the southeastern wing of the NWA - Nick Gulas, Paul Jones, Jim Crockett, Sr. and Cowboy Luttrall. But when the woman was asked to supply proof and her husband's name, she decided to keep quiet. The same year brought another complaint from an independent promoter having trouble renting an arena; again, the Justice Department responded by asking for more proof and when it was not forthcoming, no further action was taken. By 1958, the Eisenhower Justice Department had a new attorney general in William P. Rogers. In that year, the FBI received a complaint about NWA violations of

the consent decree in Portland, Oregon; when the FBI asked the Justice Department for instructions on how to proceed, the FBI was told to close the case.

About a year later, the FBI was prodded to investigate NWA misconduct in Virginia when an *outlaw* promoter's revelations embarrassed the state's governor and his state athletic commission. In early 1959 William Olivas, who wrestled as Elephant Boy, began promoting in the Virginia province of NWA member Bill Lewis (James Whitfield). When Olivas got threatening telephone calls and was intimidated by the NWA's Jim Crockett, Sr. and his knife-wielding referee Leo Voss, Olivas called police who arrested Voss; after Voss was arrested, Crockett offered to supply Olivas wrestlers in exchange for dropping the criminal complaint against Voss. Olivas agreed but was warned by three of Crockett's wrestlers (Tom Renesto, Tony Baillargeon and Mike Paidousis) that the deal was temporary because Crockett and Lewis intended to *freeze Olivas out of Virginia.* According to FBI reports, when Olivas hired wrestler Danny McShane, Crockett arranged for McShane to cancel; wrestler Dr. Jerry Graham told Olivas he couldn't wrestle for him any longer because of pressure from Toots Mondt, Crockett and Lewis; after wrestler *Chief Little Eagle* (Richard Bryant) appeared on Olivas' TV show, he was blacklisted by promoter Vince McMahon, Sr.

When Olivas complained to the Virginia Governor about the NWA's wrestling monopoly and accused the Virginia Athletic Commission of *collusion* with the NWA's Lewis and Crockett, the Virginia Athletic Commission convened hearings, suspended Lewis and contacted the Justice Department which ordered the FBI to investigate. Shortly after the investigation started, Renesto telephoned Olivas, asking to be called back on a pay telephone. Speaking in Spanish, Renesto told Olivas that Crockett was upset about the investigation and wanted to meet with Olivas to resolve their differences. A few days later, Crockett met Olivas in Roanoke, insisting they talk on the street outside the Ponce de Leon Hotel. The FBI said Crockett asked Olivas about his *"mother's health"* and then paid Olivas to *"head south and not come back because I have no intention of fooling around with you anymore."* After interviewing more than 20 persons connected with the case, the FBI concluded that six Olivas wrestlers were either blacklisted or threatened with blacklisting- *Joe*

Romero, Jan Madrid, John King, Jack London, Richard Bryant and Danny McShane (who was later denied NWA membership in 1961 when he tried to promote in Albuquerque). Among wrestlers contacted by the FBI, two were reluctant to talk; another insisted on being interviewed in a Houston hotel room, telling FBI agents he feared drastic economic loss if his identity became known to the NWA; a fourth refused to talk with FBI agents because he feared it would cost him his career.

In yet another case at about this time, the Justice Department ordered an FBI investigation of complaints by Baltimore promoter Ed Contos, Jr. who accused Toots Mondt and Vince McMahon, Sr. of monopolizing wrestling in the northeast and *controlling* the Maryland Athletic Commission. Later, Contos sued McMahon and Mondt for $300,000, alleging monopoly and blacklisting wrestlers. When the FBI finished its investigation of both the Olivas and Contos complaints, the Justice Department filed a criminal and civil contempt of court complaint against the NWA, specifically naming the NWA's Bill Lewis (James Whitfield), Jim Crockett, Sr., Toots Mondt and Vince McMahon, Sr. as violators. As punishment, the four NWA provincial bosses were enjoined from wrestling promotion for six months.

In 1960, the FBI received information that Billy Wolfe, who then operated and controlled women's wrestling in the U.S., provided women wrestlers to certain promoters for *both* wrestling shows *and* sexual dalliances. "Wolf and other promoters not only engage in sexual relations with the women wrestlers, but encourage them to engage in sexual relations with other men whom the promoters send to the women," said the complaint. Furthermore, the FBI informant alleged, "promoters collect a share of the women wrestlers' earnings as prostitutes." When the informant provided the FBI with a list of women wrestlers who could verify the allegations, the FBI investigated but later said it was unable to establish sufficient evidence that women wrestlers were "transported across state lines for immoral purposes."

Yet another controversy alleging athletic commission corruption and illegal payoffs to a United States senator came to light in 1960. The NWA's Nashville promoters Roy Welch and Nick Gulas were charged with conspiring to stop an investigation of their business practices. Welch and Gulas controlled wrestling in Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Alabama and parts of Mississippi, and they had a lot to lose from an investigation of their business tactics. One of their conversations, overheard by a third party, was later revealed in legal proceedings:

"Don't you think we better get that money up there to that guy?" Gulas said to Welch one day in 1960.

Welch replied, "He is leaving to catch aplane right away. We better get that money up there"

"Do you want to give him cash or a check?" Gulas asked.

"Hell no! Give him the cash!" Welch replied.

At this point, Gulas asked his secretary Christine Jarrett which office safe contained as much as $5,000. She told him, and he counted out $5,000 into a brown paper bag. Bag in hand, Gulas walked across the room to their *booker* Don Pruitt, asking where Pruitt had parked his car. Pruitt said his car was outside the office at the Maxwell House Hotel.

"Would you drop Roy and I off over at the Andrew Jackson Hotel? We got to get this money to Estes Kefauver!" Gulas said to Pruitt.

And Don Pruitt drove Nick Gulas and Roy Welch to the Jackson Hotel where the drop to United States Senator Estes Kefauver was made. (It should be noted here that Tennessee's U.S. Senator Carey Estes Kefauver was a powerful figure in Washington, D.C. and the nation from 1949 to the time of his death in 1963. Kefauver ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination twice, in 1952 and 1956 after gaining national attention in 1950 as chairman of the nationally televised hearings of the Senate Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, better known as the " Kefauver Committee").

When Pruitt recounted the above conversation under oath, he added, "The purpose for this - there was an investigation of the National Wrestling Alliance. That was their part that they kicked in to get the investigation stopped." Pruitt had worked for Gulas and Welch for about 13 years, first as

a wrestler and later as referee and local promoter for small towns and *spot shows.* He staged his own wrestling shows by working with local chambers of commerce, service clubs and high schools. By agreement, Gulas and Welch provided wrestlers for 10% of the gates - 12% if the matches were advertised on the Gulas- Welch weekly TV shows. After Pruitt achieved some success, Gulas and Welch worried he might break off from them and go into business for himself. To prevent that, Gulas and Welch began a systematic strategy to *kill* Pruitt's towns. In the course of several months, Pruitt was not sent the wrestlers he advertised; he was being *substituted to death,* he said. Other wrestlers sent to him, he said, had been instructed to put on poor performances, not to give the fans their money's worth. Some wrestlers told Pruitt that Gulas and Welch thought he was getting "too strong" and he was going to be *"jerked around until he fell into line"*

Pruitt finally quit working for Gulas and Welch and tried to obtain his own promoter's license in Kentucky. After filing forms and depositing fees, Pruitt's application was rejected while another applicant, who worked for Gulas and Welch, was licensed. Pruitt went to the Kentucky Athletic Commissioner Bob Evans, and asked why his application had been rejected. According to Pruitt, Evans replied, "No reason. I'm just not going to issue you [a license]. You better talk to Gulas and Welch." After Pruitt left Evans' office, he told his story at the local U.S. Attorney's offices, where he was promised if he would write it all down, "the right people will get it." By now, President John F. Kennedy's Justice Department was headed by his brother, Robert F. Kennedy. A week or so later, the Justice Department's Chicago office contacted Pruitt, inviting him to meet in Chicago to discuss his case. Before leaving for Chicago, Pruitt showed his Justice Department correspondence to a friend who was an office flunky for Gulas and Welch, asking that it be kept confidential. Later, Pruitt testified under oath, "The next day I got a call from [Kentucky Athletic Commissioner] Bob Evans - three calls in one day. [Evans told me] that Gulas and Welch wanted to talk to me. They wanted to work something out with me. That he understood I had gone to the Justice Department. I said, 'How did you know that?' And he said that is what he was told. I said, 'By whom?' And he said, ' Gulas and Welch.' Mr. Evans said, 'Now we don't want to do this because you are going to get everybody in trouble.' I said, 'My friend, I want to make a living. You are depriving me from making a living.'

“I guess I had a half a dozen phone calls and everybody in Gulas’ office wanted me to come down there. I said, ‘I’ve already been there. You didn’t want to do any business. They said, ‘Well come down. We want to do business. We’ll work out something.’ So I go back and the same hassle. They are going to put me in these towns where they have the licenses and they control it and they will let you go for awhile. They will *substitute* your towns *to death*, one way or the other, and they will destroy them. So they broke me again,” Pruitt testified.

Afterward in March 1961, Pruitt drove to Chicago’s Federal courthouse where he spent several hours talking with Harry H. Faris of the Justice Department’s Midwest office. Pruitt told his story again: he had tried without success to promote in Kentucky; Gulas and Welch withheld wrestlers when his promotions became successful. He described how Gulas and Welch substituted wrestlers at the last minute after they had been advertised, instructing some wrestlers to *kill his towns* by putting on poor performances, and controlling wrestlers by assigning them to *gasoline runs* (e.g., traveling 650 miles for a $15 match) or loaning them money to establish financial dependency. He told about how Mexican and Canadian wrestlers were controlled through threatened and actual *“passport trouble”* Pruitt’s complaint was sent to Washington, but the requested FBI investigation stalled. An internal Justice memorandum concluded, “This complaint is probably much like others we have received. The [National Wrestling] Alliance booker and promoter have been trying to keep outsiders out of his territory. The outsider is not wholly reliable (here, he does not pay taxes and gave the Kentucky Athletic Commission a bad check).” There is no record of a Justice Department follow-up. Ten years later, however, after filing an antitrust suit against the wrestling syndicate, Pruitt was re-interviewed by a Justice investigator who then wanted to convene grand jury proceedings against Gulas and Welch, among others. But the proposed grand jury proceedings were never convened.

Four other complaints about NWA consent decree violations arrived at Robert Kennedy’s Justice Department later in 1961. Two complaints

accused Vince McMahon, Sr. of boycotting independent promoters in the northeast; another complaint was filed by an unidentified blacklisted wrestler; a fourth complaint was filed by promoters John Doyle and *James E. Barnett* who claimed they were denied NWA membership because they promoted in competition with NWA members. Of those five complaints in 1961, the Justice Department investigated *only one* - the NWA's refusal to admit Doyle and Barnett as members. Interestingly, Doyle was the same John Doyle who had cooperated earlier with Justice investigators in 1955 and became one of the government's key witnesses against the NWA; as such, he was now eligible for the Government's protection.

Complaints about NWA consent decree violations continued to trickle into Washington during the 1960s. An unidentified California wrestler reported in 1962 that "both my wife and I are stranded with no money, a hotel and phone bill and no place to go because it looks like I am blackballed again by the [National Wrestling] Alliance." Yet another complaint again fingered Vince McMahon, Sr., Toots Mondt and Jim Crockett, Sr. for boycotting independent promoters who asked them for wrestlers. Another complaint came from a former NWA member and signatory to the 1956 consent decree about continuing territorial allocations. But the Justice Department didn't investigate *any* of these charges because of "our past experience in these matters," said an internal memo. By 1962, the Justice Department had been notified on *at least 15 occasions of NWA violations of the 1956judgment.* Except for the Olivas case and the Doyle-Barnett membership controversy, the Justice Department ignored *all* other complaints although it sent perfunctory letters acknowledging their receipt.

One other complaint about NWA illegalities *was* investigated vigorously when the Justice Department was bypassed in favor of going directly to the FBI. In 1962, George Leonard Clay tried to promote in the territory *owned* and controlled by the NWA's LeRoy Michael McGuirk of Tulsa. McGuirk booked wrestlers in Oklahoma and parts of Arkansas, Missouri and Louisiana where he arranged for the Louisiana Athletic Commission to require all wrestling promoters to obtain talent through his

booking agency (a Louisiana State Boxing and Wrestling Commission rule that was not repealed until 1985 when Vince McMahon, Jr.'s WWF threatened a lawsuit). The FBI learned that when Clay promoted in *opposition* to McGuirk in Oklahoma, he received threatening telephone calls from unidentified persons, one of whom said *"You'll be at the bottom of the river."*Three of Clay's wrestlers

- *Corsico Joe, Jerry London* and *Hans Stiner* - said they were told by McGuirk if they continued to work for Clay, they would not be booked anywhere else in the country. In addition to blacklisting threats, Clay's wrestlers also were threatened physically. After one Clay wrestling show, McGuirk told Clay's wrestlers that his men had been at the match that night *"just looking" but that next time they "wouldn't be just looking."* Clay's wrestlers were told that Danny Hodge, McGuirk's *shooter,* would challenge them in future matches, and Clay received an anonymous telephone call that there *might be a bomb under the h)od of his car,* that he had better *"watch out and stop promoting wrestling"* The FBI turned over its findings to the Kennedy Justice Department, but no further action was taken. This was to be a repeated pattern in the Government's response to complaints about NWA consent decree violations: frequent charges and complaints by independent promoters and blacklisted wrestlers, some of which involved FBI field investigations

- but none caused the Justice Department's enforcement division to file contempt proceedings against the NWA.

Another challenge to the NWA's wrestling monopoly was undertaken by Oregon wrestler Jack Poppenheim in the early 1960s. Poppenheim worked as a top *heel* (Kurt von Poppenheim) for many years on the NWA's Pacific Northwest circuit with his blonde crewcut and clipped goatee, a Prussian monocle and a ring robe decorated with the Iron Cross. He was a main event star and Pacific Coast champion in Portland, Seattle, Tacoma and Bremerton. Then Poppenheim applied to the Portland (Oregon) Boxing and Wrestling Commission in 1963 for a license to promote in Oregon where the NWA's Don Owen had operated without competition for about 20

years. The Portland Commission told Poppenheim it had authority to license whichever bookers and promoters it chose, and it had already chosen the NWA's Don Owen. The Owen-controlled Portland Commission said, "the issuance of a second wrestling matchmaker's license at this time would not be in the best interests of wrestling in the Portland area."

Poppenheim's attorney thought he had a slam-dunk monopoly case, since Don Owen's signature was on that 1956 consent decree, a fact that meant Owen had promised to stop illegal business practices. With Owen seemingly caught red-handed, Poppenheim's lawyer undertook a long, expensive crusade to break the NWA's monopoly in Oregon and Washington, beginning with a complaint to the San Francisco office of the Justice Department; a preliminary investigation was authorized four years later but no further action was taken. In the meantime, Poppenheim filed suit against the Portland Commission, claiming his license denial was arbitrary, capricious and a restraint of free trade; when an Oregon court dismissed the suit as frivolous, Poppenheim appealed to Oregon's Supreme Court, where he lost again. Finally, Poppenheim's case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1971, but it also refused to overturn the Oregon court's decision, ruling that the Portland Commission could do whatever it pleased and was *not* obligated to issue a promoter license to Poppenheim or anybody else.

Even more complaints about NWA consent decree violations reached Justice Department headquarters in the 1960s. In 1963, a Midwestern U.S. attorney forwarded another complaint from a former NWA member about territorial allocations, but Justice did not respond. In another case, a wrestler wrote three letters asking for Justice Department action, asserting "I am going to fight this to the end;" if he did so, he fought alone. A year later, two wrestlers who tried to promote in Florida wrote to U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, complaining the NWA's Cowboy Luttrall and Eddie Graham controlled wrestling and wrestlers in that state. After listing their grievances against the wrestling cartel - the usual laundry list of blacklisting, territorial monopolies and booker boycotts - they wrote, "We

ask the Justice Department, as its name implies, to investigate this so-called Wrestling Alliance." When asked to provide more facts, the wrestlers did so but a month later were forced out of business by NWA members. Later, one of these wrestler's wives wrote to the Attorney General, with a carbon copy to President Lyndon Johnson. She asked: *"What of the court's ruling in U.S. v. National Wrestling Alliance? Was that just a sham?* Or *have the payoffs gone higher than our state? How is it possible in our democracy that one handful of men can become so powerful that even the Justice Department hesitates to act?"* Receipt of her letter was politely acknowledged.

Another independent wrestling promoter went to the FBI in 1967 with the same old story, this time fingering Willie Gilzenberg of New Jersey, an NWA confederate of Vince McMahon, Sr. and Toots Mondt in the northeast. The promoter complained about "syndicate control" of wrestling talent, saying that wrestlers he tried to book were threatened with blacklisting and didn't show up. He told the FBI that four wrestlers agreed to work for him only if they could use ring names other than the names with which they had developed followings in the NWA. The FBI turned its report over to President Lyndon Johnson's Attorney General Ramsey Clark, but there is no record of a Justice Department response.

A little over a year later in 1969, another independent promoter contacted the New York office of the Justice Department to complain that "a monopoly on wrestling promotions exists throughout the United States so that it's virtually impossible for an independent matchmaker to put on a show." The complaint identified the NWA's Vince McMahon, Sr., Toots Mondt, Willie Gilzenberg, Sam Muchnick and Madison Square Garden promoters Charlie and Walter Johnston (Smallshaw) as culprits. The complainant said the NWA wrestling cartel controlled wrestling in both large and small towns; in small towns, he said, they ruin wrestling by either overexposure or by staging boring matches to *kill* spectator interest. He described rampant blacklisting of wrestlers who worked for NWA competitors, citing an occasion when he had booked midget wrestlers who failed to appear because they would "be blackballed throughout the country." He said he had received physical threats and reported them to local police and the FBI, but the FBI told him to contact the Justice Department. There is no record of a Justice Department follow-up to this complaint.

By now, the dozens of wrestlers who had risked their careers by complaining to the Justice Department about NWA violations of the 1956 consent judgment became cynical, suspecting governmental collusion with The Business. How else was the Justice Department's inaction to be explained? Some wrestlers continued to write letters to the Justice Department, now complaining about *official* inaction. One wrestler's letter said, "I've had no further word from you except more promises to investigate" the NWA's Carolina province controlled by Jim Crockett.

But of all the blacklisted wrestlers and outlaw promoters who asked the Justice Department for help, none was more persistent than Antone "Ripper" Leone. Ripper's correspondence with the Justice Department warned that the wrestling monopoly was still violating the Sherman Act "with impunity and still stealing and defrauding the government in taxes and preventing wrestlers from earning their livelihoods." Ripper wrote, *"I depend upon my officials to help and I can't understand why no legal actions have been taken in this matter long ago. I have been quite patient but time is running out and I can see no valid reasons why the government should allow these flagrant violators to remain in active business while forcing men like me to starve"* A sarcastic Justice Department internal memo speculated that Ripper's problems with the NWA were of his own making, that he could no longer perform at the level of his youth and that it was probably inevitable that Justice would continue to receive his unsolicited "missals."

Still more complaints were filed with the Justice Department in 1969 and 1970 but they provoked no more official interest than had others. Finally, in July 1972, the Nixon Justice Department decided to formally review the NWA's compliance with the 1956 decree - *sixteen years after it was entered.* Sam Muchnick opened NWA files and provided documents stretching back to 1960 for inspection. But the review was surprisingly superficial: Justice investigators analyzed only four of the dozens of complaints made since 1958 and after that review, Justice attorney Stephen F. Sonnett of the Judgment Enforcement Section concluded: *"the NWA* [is]

no longer a conduit used by its members to carry out trade restraining activities," although investigators did find "credible evidence of violations" in a "situation in North Carolina," where the NWA's Jim Crockett, Sr. controlled wrestling. Justice headquarters recommended a grand jury investigation of the North Carolina violations and transferred responsibility for it to Atlanta's Justice Department field office. But instead of convening a grand jury to investigate the North Carolina allegations, the Atlanta field office asked Justice headquarters for authority to return to St. Louis and again examine NWA files and interview Sam Muchnick. The follow-up investigation finally got underway in January 1974, shortly after Muchnick told Justice attorneys the NWA would probably be dissolved in August of that year (because, Muchnick said, "It is difficult to raise money for legal fees"). Worried that NWA files might be destroyed, Justice ordered its Atlanta office to conduct a file search "before the Alliance is disbanded." Within weeks, Justice investigator Jack Williamson revisited Muchnick, who told Williamson he had repeatedly urged the NWA membership to abide by antitrust law but felt he had been unsuccessful. Muchnick singled out seven members as being especially resistant to compliance - *Fritz von Erich* (Jack Adkisson), *Eddie Graham* (Gossett), *Nick Gulas, Roy Welch, The Sheik* (Eddie Farhat), *Herman Gust* and *Mike LeBell.* Muchnick said the prevailing NWA philosophy - that the NWA should protect individual members from competition - caused him to want out of its presidency.

After interrogating Muchnick and scrutinizing NWA files, Williamson told Justice headquarters his review raised "a strong suspicion that *members of the Alliance are conducting their affairs in a manner which violates the antitrust laws as well as violating the consent decree of which many of the promoters are signatories."* A month later, Williamson asked Justice headquarters for approval to convene a grand jury to indict several NWA members for violations of the Sherman Act as well as the 1956 consent judgment. And Williamson identified the likely NWA defendants as - *Jim Barnett's Georgia promotion, Eddie Graham's Florida promotion, the Welch family's Alabama promotion and the Gulas-Welch promotion in Tennessee.* But Justice headquarters stalled on approving the grand jury investigation. A few months later, Williamson sent Justice headquarters another report that described how Georgia Championship's Jim Barnett was *"blocking talent"* from Ann Gunkel in Georgia and the Poffos in Kentucky. Finally, in January 1975 - 10 months after Williamson requested

authorization to convene a grand jury for possible criminal indictment - President Ford's Justice headquarters told Williamson his request was *"denied on the ground that the resources necessary to complete this inquiry can be more effectively utilized in other matters."* When Williamson was told he couldn't take the NWA to court, he recommended the investigation be closed, and it was.

One other complaint about the wrestling business came to the Justice Department in 1974 - the monopoly of women's wrestling by Lillian Ellison (Fabulous Moolah). Two of Moolah's wrestlers complained they were routinely cheated on their *payoffs,* saying Moolah gave them minimal wages and retained a substantial booking fee. They said when they complained to Moolah and threatened to work for another *booker,* she told them, "I'll have the hell beat out of you" There is no record of a Justice Department follow-up to these complaints.

When I naively walked into the Atlanta office of the Justice Department and talked with Jack Williamson in March 1975, I knew nothing of the foregoing Justice Department history with the wrestling business nor did I know of Williamson's recent struggle with his superiors in Washington, and Williamson said nothing about it. Instead, he listened politely and talked about the Justice Department's limited resources. It was a few months after I met with Williamson that I received the 3,000 pages of Justice Department documents and learned the whole story.

In studying the more than 3,000 pages of Justice Department and FBI files on the wrestling business from 1953 through the 1970s, I learned much about the history of pro wrestling in the United States. I also learned that my own blacklisting and attempts to promote in competition with the NWA were not isolated episodes; my experience with The Business was just another chapter in a much longer story. As Pedro Martinez told me in 1975, "Everything they're doing is illegal." But I also learned something even more important, and it disillusioned me. When it came to pro wrestling, at least, my own Government's law enforcement had been indifferent, and I was surprised. This is not what I'd been taught at home or at school about

law and justice, and this is not what Dad fought for when he landed on Normandy's beaches during World War II. And this is not what I taught my own children about the importance of fairness and truth. It is difficult to imagine how the United States Department of Justice could have ever been more *unjust* - more disinterested in the consequences of the wrestling industry's gangster mentality and methods or more inattentive to the NWA's defiant contempt of the court order that its 35 members signed in 1956. The plain and simple fact is that the NWA's lawless reign over professional wrestling continued unchecked and unchallenged for more than 22 years after it promised to clean up its act.

And maybe that was or still is the most significant revelation of the Justice Department's own files on The Business - those 3,000 Justice and FBI pages say as much or more about my Government's *misguided conduct* than pro wrestling's *lawless misconduct.* Why? The Justice Department's own evidence shows the NWA's illegal conspiracy continued despite official knowledge of it, and it would not have been difficult to prosecute those violations if enforcement resources had been mobilized. Instead, the Justice Department directed its attention toward more politically fashionable targets - monopolies in oil, telecommunications and aluminum. Once again, the inference was clear enough: *pro wrestling was not to be taken seriously.* My own Government not only failed to enforce a court judgment of its own making but refused to respond to all those cries for help - to address the human costs and casualties memorialized in the dozens of complaints from blocked promoters and blacklisted wrestlers. As for the politics of it all, it is worth noting that Justice Department inaction was bipartisan, spanning the administrations of five Presidents, three Republicans and two Democrats - Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford.

Regardless of political philosophy, none of the attorneys general of these administrations kept the Department's 1956 promise "to follow developments in professional wrestling closely, with a view to bringing contempt actions should it ever appear that the federal antitrust laws are being violated in any significant respect."

But that broken promise by the United States Government cost an unknown number of livelihoods and personal tragedies for over two decades, and it set the stage for several lawsuits against The Business, one

of them mine. By now, it was clear enough that The Business viewed the 1956 consent judgment as a *work* and Justice Department investigators, gullible *marks*.

Chapter 8

SHOOTING MATCHES

WHEN THE NATIONAL Wrestling Alliance assembled in the Ruby Room of the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas for its 1974 annual meeting, the yearly supreme celebration of wrestling's monopoly power, president Sam Muchnick was worried. He spoke sentimentally to the membership about his 42 years in wrestling, noting he was the only survivor of the NWA's founding fathers. Rambling on about the early days, he scolded his fellow promoters for their bickering. "What the NWA needs now, more than at any time in its history is complete harmony and everyone working together with no backbiting," he said.

Despite some protests, Muchnick was reelected NWA president for another year, but his final term was conditioned on an important qualification: Muchnick insisted that all NWA members agree to *personally indemnify him against antitrust lawsuits.* And before he left office in 1975, he arranged for the NWA to retain Frank Karsten, a retired congressman from Missouri and then a Washington, D.C. attorney, as its general counsel. In a special closed session at the 1975 NWA meetings, Karsten unleashed some straight talk about the NWA's legal exposure that resulted from certain institutionalized practices. But Muchnick's paternalism was insufficient to save the NWA from itself. The longstanding mat monopoly was approaching self-destruction. When Muchnick asked his membership for personal indemnification in 1974, he wasn't just paranoid. He was realistic, even perceptive.

Wrestling's dirty little business secrets were about to hit the courtroom fans.

Some of the victims of wrestling's illegal cartel finally found a practical alternative to asking the United States Justice Department to enforce law in wrestling - why not take matters into your own hands with privately retained lawyers and personally financed lawsuits? That's what happened when six civil antitrust suits were filed against the NWA in the 1970s, and they marked a turning point in the legitimacy of the old mat monopoly.

A year before, Muchnick and four other NWA promoters and one state athletic commissioner narrowly escaped an embarrassing Federal antitrust trial in Kentucky. The Kentucky lawsuit was brought by Joseph Donald Pruitt, better known to southern wrestling fans as Don Pruitt or Don Baker or Mr. X, when he wrestled under the *sock.* As discussed earlier, Pruitt tried to promote in competition - *opposition* - to the NWA, and it was Pruitt who went to the Kennedy Justice Department in 1961, blowing the whistle on the Gulas-Welch wrestling syndicate, athletic commission corruption and bribes to U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver. After Senator Kefauver died in 1963, Pruitt's future as an independent promoter was no brighter. In 1973, ten years after asking the Justice Department for help, Pruitt decided to prosecute the wrestling syndicate by himself. The target of Pruitt's suit was the regional wrestling monopoly controlled by Nick Gulas and Roy Welch in Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky and Indiana in alleged combination with NWA president Sam Muchnick, Indianapolis promoters Dick The Bruiser (Richard Afflis) and Wilbur Snyder and Kentucky Athletic Commissioner M. Robert Evans. Pruitt alleged that Gulas, Welch, Muchnick, Snyder and Afflis illegally monopolized wrestling in the four-state territory by *boycotting competitors, blacklisting wrestlers and bribing arena managers, television stations and state athletic commissions.*

Pruitt's lawsuit got the NWA's immediate attention when he started *shooting* from the witness stand at a long list of The Business' dirty laundry: about the NWA's organizational purpose ("It is protection, sir", said Pruitt); about how NWA world champions are selected ("somebody they can control"), bribes to TV stations (" Nick Gulas paid $375 a week to WDRB-TV in Louisville to keep me off"); about exploiting Mexican wrestlers by paying them $10 a show and getting their work visas revoked when they complained; about *stretching* ("they broke a boy's leg and arm - Kid Scotty Williams, his real name was Donald C. Scott") and about how NWA promoters controlled and corrupted state athletic commissions in both Kentucky and Indiana.

In Kentucky, Pruitt revealed, “You just didn’t get a license in Kentucky unless it was okayed through Gulas and Welch. I have been in the [Nashville] office of Gulas and Welch when an applicant has applied for a license in Kentucky and the Commissioner would immediately call them and tell them what had happened. And he would ask them if they knew the man and if they wanted him to have a license in the state of Kentucky . . . I have also heard Gulas make the statement ‘*We have The Man in our pocket. We control him.’* Nick Gulas made the statement that they delivered thirty-five hundred dollars in cash under the table to control the man [M. Robert Evans, Kentucky Athletic Commission chairman].” One of Pruitt’s witnesses was Wee Willie Davis, a six foot-ten inch former wrestler and wrestling promoter whose real name was William Grundy Davis. At 67, Wee Willie had been around pro wrestling since the 1930s, had appeared in 40 movies and achieved national prominence in 1956 when he won $32,000 on TV’s *$64,000 Question.* Wee Willie had been a partner with *Jim Barnett* and Kentucky Senator Marlowe Cook in Louisville, but was ultimately squeezed out of The Business when Kentucky Athletic Commissioner Wood Hardin refused to renew his promoter license. Under oath, Wee Willie testified the Kentucky Athletic Commissioner was controlled by Gulas and Welch who “greased his palm.” And Wee Willie revealed that Danny Dusek (Syd Nabors), who worked for Gulas and Welch as a referee and ringman, admitted he was “sent to give money to the Athletic Commission in Kentucky.” Pruitt’s lawsuit also presented evidence of corruption within the Indiana Athletic Commission: “ [Dick The] Bruiser and [Wilbur] Snyder will dare you to apply for a [promoter] license. Just recently did - a physical threat to a guy that would even attempt to apply for a license.” As an example, Pruitt said The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) of Detroit had applied for an Indiana license twelve times, unsuccessfully. Under oath, Pruitt explained it this way: “There is one license that . . . they run once a year, a *benefit* show for the Commission there, the State of Indiana.”

Don Pruitt’s legal assault on the wrestling business and athletic commission corruption was unprecedented, as was the peculiar defense put forth by lawyers for the wrestling business. Years later, Pruitt attorney William T. Warner, said, “ *They* [Gulas, Welch, Bruiser and Snyder] *would sit there and admit they bought and sold territories, which is a flagrant violation of antitrust laws. There was nothing going on that they didn’t admit.* Their attitude was *‘We bought it* [the territory] *fair and square and if*

somebody doesn ‘t want to go along with us, they don’t work for us. And if they don’t work for us, they don’t work.’” But Pruitt’s lawsuit never reached the jury. Two years after filing, Pruitt settled out of court for about $60,000. Pruitt’s attorney said later, “I didn’t take this case to clean up anything or save the world. I just wanted to help my client conduct his business. But I was a junior member of a mid-sized law firm up against some pretty awesome legal talent. The attorneys for the other side were very determined. *One of the Gulas lawyers, in particular, was a politically connected guy.* And *the wrestling promoters had a lot more money than Don Pruitt did, and he couldn’t take the case much further”*

After Don Pruitt’s lawsuit was settled out of court, another legal assault on the wrestling monopoly was launched by Eddie Einhorn’s independent promotion. Like so many victims of the NWA’s rough tactics, Einhorn’s promotion also had asked the Justice Department for help. Einhorn’s lawyer called the Gerald Ford Justice Department in June 1975, about two months after I talked to the Atlanta field office. Without identifying Einhorn, his attorney told the Justice Department his client was encountering “great difficulty” in the southeast and Midwest because of illegal activities of existing promoters. Einhorn’s lawyer complained that *Jim Crockett, Jr., Vince McMahon, Sr., Eddie Graham, Mike LeBell and Jim Barnett were responsible for threats made to*

Einhorn s wrestlers, termination of employment for wrestlers who worked for Einhorn, staging competing matches, placing ads that confused the public and tying up local television and arenas.

Again, however, Justice headquarters stalled when Justice attorney Stephen Sonnett, author of the NWA-is-no-longer-a-conduit memo in 1972, asked Einhorn’s attorney to provide more details and cautioned this was “no guarantee that the Department would fully investigate the matter and take some action upon it.” In an internal Justice memo, Sonnett repeated his view that “there was a problem generally with obtaining credible witnesses,” while admitting “my experience has been that violations have occurred but that expenditures of resources in taking action was not

warranted due to *the small amount of commerce involved and the local nature of the violations."*

Years later, Einhorn said, "The *whole feeling was 'Who cares?' You couldn't make it a popular issue. Nobody cared.. Everybody loved the wrestling, but they didn't think it was important enough to fight over.* So, they let it go. Nobody knew what was going on. You had to be able to fight the wrestling establishment on a lot of levels. On television, I could fight them easily. Talent was tougher, but you could do it if you spent some money getting talent. *The toughest part to do was in the arenas. They had a lot of arenas.* The reason I died was I couldn't get into Madison Square Garden. The Garden and the Nassau Coliseum. *McMahon had those sewed up and paid off and everything else.* There was no Meadowlands, then; I had to run shows in Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City. We had three big shows that did $120,000 apiece - which was big money in those days. Then we had to stop because winter came, and I had no place to run. So that is where they really got you the most - their deals with the arenas. *And the* [state athletic] *commissions, the people they took care of, you know. Some commissions are more independent than others, but most of them ain't,,*" Einhorn said.

After Einhorn's promotion lost more than $500,000, he closed it down. Later, another Einhorn booking agent, John Powers, filed an antitrust suit against the NWA's Carolinas promoter Jim Crockett, his partner Joe Murnick and the city of Winston-Salem. The event that triggered the suit was a decision by the Winston-Salem mayor and aldermen to sign a restrictive contract with Crockett Promotions which had the effect of locking Einhorn's IWA out of Winston-Salem Memorial Coliseum. Einhorn and Crockett had promoted wrestling on alternating weeks throughout 1975, and Einhorn's 19 shows grossed about $290,000. After Crockett agreed to bail out the city's hockey team from financial trouble, he was rewarded with a 14 day "protection clause" in his wrestling contracts. The 14 day "protection" prevented other wrestling promoters from using the Coliseum, giving Crockett a monopoly. The Powers- Einhorn lawsuit alleged similar "protection" clauses gave Crockett a wrestling monopoly in several other southeastern cities where wrestling was staged at public facilities - Richmond, Greensboro, Raleigh, Fayetteville, Charlotte, and Greenville.

But Powers' lawsuit was ultimately dropped when he ran out of money to sustain his case, and Einhorn was unwilling to throw more good money after bad. Later, Einhorn said, *"The only guys who fought the wrestling establishment were ex-wrestlers and guys with no brains and no money. So they never won! The wrestling industry always won,"* Einhorn said. Still, the Powers lawsuit on behalf of Einhorn put The Business on notice: if you continue with these illegal business practices, we're coming after you with lawyers and lawsuits.

Finally acknowledging the tenacity of the NWA's *chokehold,* I got a full-time job selling real estate. It just finally got down to the point where after having suffered so much, I decided to get a steady job so I could provide for my family. We rented an apartment and Nita stuck it out with me, even though she was devastated from losing our home, cars and credit - it was like the 1929 crash in our family. She was distraught, and who could blame her. I felt horrible. The kids were so young, they didn't understand. All they knew was their daddy tried to start a business that failed.

While I sold real estate and wrestled occasionally for small independent promotions, I kept in touch with T-Bolt, who had eaten some crow and got back into the NWA. In November 1975 he was invited to wrestle in Florida for Eddie Graham. Florida business was down, and Graham thought T-Bolt could bring the crowds back, but he was told that he'd have to begin as a *prelim* wrestler. "They told me I'd have to start all over again, to prove myself to the Alliance, to start at the bottom and work my way back up. It was worse when I went back. The pay was horrible and the things they wanted me to do [racial caricatures] was ridiculous. Then, I really understood how prejudiced the NWA was toward me and how prejudiced they were toward blacks," T-Bolt said.

T-Bolt's *payoffs* were so small he asked Eddie Graham for a $1,500 loan, which was happily provided by Graham and his partner Jim Barnett because it tightened their control over T-Bolt. After about three months, Barnett's *booker* Tom Renesto called T-Bolt, asking him to wrestle for Georgia Championship. Renesto told T-Bolt he was needed in Georgia

because Dusty Rhodes had been injured in an Augusta match and would be out of action for awhile. The Georgia promotion wanted another wrestler who could shuck and jive for black wrestling fans. Renesto said, *"Bolt, you're the one who comes closest to replacing Dusty."* It was an insulting invitation, and T-Bolt felt demeaned by replacing the guy who had stolen his act and *gimmick* in the first place. But somebody was needed to draw black wrestling fans, and T-Bolt did what he was told: he came back to Atlanta to *imitate* Dusty Rhodes for $300 a week. One Friday night in 1976, T-Bolt called me before the Atlanta matches and asked for a ride to the City Auditorium. He said he was glad to be working again, even if he was booked only in Atlanta when Dusty wasn't interested. T-Bolt said he was trying to be a good boy and keep his mouth shut so he could get back up to the usual six shows a week that the Georgia circuit operated.

I drove him downtown and tagged along as he walked into the dressing room where Jim Barnett, Paul Jones and Ralph Freed stood talking among themselves in a corner. When Barnett saw me, he telephoned the front office for a couple of cops. While Barnett was on the phone, Freed strolled over and said, "There is the door, brother. If you want to come in, buy your ticket like the rest of the dummies." And the police helped me find my way out of the building. Nonetheless, I started driving T-Bolt to the Atlanta matches each week. One night, I ran into Tom Renesto, now working for Barnett and who I still suspected of sabotaging Ann Gunkel's promotion. That night, a smirking Renesto said, "Hey, baby, how ya doin'? I know how tough it is out there and I know what went down and I know what's going down. *That's why I got my deal from Jim* [Barnett] *in writing"* I was a little surprised that Renesto would brazenly admit to being Barnett's mole, but I tried to mask my contempt for the guy as I asked him for work. I told him I needed work, I'd even do some refereeing. "We've got no openings, baby, but I couldn't use *you* if I wanted to," Renesto snapped.

Four weeks after T-Bolt came to Atlanta, Barnett called him into the office. "Dusty wants to come back, and we've got to make room for him," said Barnett. The situation was tense, and T-Bolt expected to be told to leave. But Dusty didn't want to work the whole week in the circuit's small towns, he just wanted to fly up from Tampa for the Friday night shows in Atlanta for $600 or $700 a shot. For T-Bolt, making room for Dusty meant he had to wrestle somewhere in the hinterland when Dusty wanted to

wrestle in Atlanta; if Dusty didn't want to work Atlanta, T-Bolt was permitted to wrestle on the weekly shows. The night Dusty returned to Atlanta for $700 plus his Tampa airfare, T-Bolt drove 600 miles round trip for a match in Savannah for $200 with no travel reimbursement. This alternating arrangement between the two of them in Atlanta continued for two months, and T-Bolt kept his mouth shut even though he was given only one or two bookings a week, which came to $200 to $450. When he got to work the Atlanta show, he could make as much as $850 a week if he was also booked in Augusta. Finally, T-Bolt was given an entire week of bookings - six shows plus two TV tapings. And for three months, he made between $650 and $2,250 a week working main events in all the cities. Unless Dusty was in the Georgia territory.

One night when I drove T-Bolt downtown, I ran into wrestler Leon Brown, the guy who worked for our IWL in 1974 and often provided me with inside information. This night he said, "You may as well forget about getting back into Georgia Championship!" When I asked why, he told me about a conversation he had with Barnett's office manager Doug Smith. Brown had asked Smith about how T- Bolt was doing and what the situation was with me and Smith had replied, " *Thunderbolt is doing just fine but that no-good-motherfucking- son-of-a-bitch Wilson will never wrestle here even if he is the last wrestler in the world!"* I thanked Leon Brown for the encouraging news. That's the night I finally realized I was through with the entire NWA. I couldn't get booked anywhere in Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas and Virginia, Alabama or Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania or Hawaii. I had been squeezed out by not only Barnett, but Crockett, Graham, Gulas, Ward and all their NWA friends and business partners. And although Renesto promised to make inquiries for me to wrestle in Texas and California, he never contacted anybody.

In early summer, T-Bolt was booked *with* Dusty in two Atlanta main events. They were tag matches in which Dusty and T-Bolt wrestled against Abdullah The Butcher (Larry Shrieve) and The Spoiler (Don Jardine). The two shows drew the year's biggest gates in Atlanta, with all four main event wrestlers paid $1,400 for each match. Neither Dusty nor T-Bolt had made as much money working alone in Atlanta. But working as Dusty' tag partner meant T-Bolt had to make Dusty look good by taking *bumps* and getting pinned. After the first show, T- Bolt complained, and he asked for a meeting

with Barnett, Rhodes, The Spoiler and assistant booker Gary Hart. T-Bolt argued the scripts for his tag matches were making him look bad, that Dusty was getting the star *push* at T-Bolt's expense. Barnett looked at T-Bolt and said, sarcastically, "You know, you should be the *booker*!" T-Bolt, not sure whether Barnett was serious, said, "Yeah, I'd love to! But apparently, the only way I can do that is through you." Barnett replied, "Well, Dusty wants to come back full time, so he will take your *spot."* At that point, T-Bolt was booked less often and his *payoffs* dropped.

After several months of being jerked around to where his bookings were dependant on Dusty's travel whims, T-Bolt was ready to quit and find work elsewhere. Although he and Dusty never had personal animosity in their relationship, Dusty was in a sense responsible for some of T-Bolt's problems. They both had the same wrestling act - the shuck-and-jive style of ring comedy - and they were both great talkers on *the stick.* But Dusty was a politically connected white guy, having made a lot of money in Florida for Eddie Graham, Barnett's partner in the NWA's southeastern cartel. With that, came a certain amount of power. On the other hand, T-Bolt was regarded as the dumb uppity nigger, constantly complaining about his pay or bookings or scripts.

Still, T-Bolt could be philosophical about his predicament. "I was blessed, and I caught on in this business. I am a *showboat,* a crowd pleaser," T-Bolt said. "But Barnett replaced me by making Dusty Rhodes the American Dream. Barnett took what I had - what I had used for years to draw money, and took a guy - his whole purpose was to make another person do what I could do and get rid of me completely. And Barnett even told me that," T-Bolt said later in court proceedings. Then one night in Macon, Moondog (Lonnie Mayne) was asked to do *a job* for T-Bolt and although he did it, he raced into the dressing room after the match, angry and screaming: "I *ain't doing any more jobs for the nigger!'* A fist-fight ensued while other wrestlers looked on. T-Bolt left the Georgia territory in July 1976, heading north to Toronto, where he and The Sheik worked a *program* and traded the Sheik's United States Heavyweight Championship back and forth.

Not quite through with The Business, I tried to think more like a wrestling promoter - to develop an *angle* (*"the angle is the dangle that heats the meat")* that would get me back into wrestling. I figured if I could devise a money-making *gimmick* for Georgia Championship, they would take me back. So, I designed a promotional idea that involved Brian Oldfield, the world champion shot-putter who I'd recently met. My proposed *gimmick* involved pairing Oldfield and me as tag-team partners in an outdoor event in Atlanta held at the baseball park after a combination Braves game and James Brown rock concert. My plan for this baseball-wrestling-rock party called for pyrotechnics, too - the evening would end with a spectacular fireworks show. As I saw it, this cross-sport marketing brilliance was custom-designed for Ted Turner, who had just bought the Atlanta Braves to solidify his planned cable television operation which now featured not only the Braves and Atlanta Hawks but his real moneymaker on Channel 17, pro wrestling.

When I contacted Turner's office to pitch my idea, I was given an appointment with the Braves' promotions man Bob Hope. I laid it all out for Hope, who said it was a "super idea, but can you get the wrestling people to go along with it? Why don't you go see them," he said. So I contacted Renesto, and I took along Rich Soltys, my old friend from Edgewood who'd introduced me to Brian Oldfield. Barnett was out of town, looking after his interest in the Florida promotion, but Renesto said he liked the idea and he'd present it to Barnett the next week. When I called back to find out about Barnett's reaction, Renesto said Barnett didn't like it. A month later, Renesto and Barnett and Turner staged an outdoor wrestling card after a Braves game *with* a rock concert but *without* Brian Oldfield or me; I understand it was a great show and Barnett made a lot of money.

A few months later, I wrestled Brian anyway and it was a *shoot.* Brian had asked me to join him for an appearance at the Scottish Highland Games at Stone Mountain Park outside Atlanta. Both Brian and I had some Scottish blood in our gene pools, and Brian had been trying to get the International Track Association's pro tour off the ground and to publicize it, he got involved in the hammer-and- rock-throw on the Scottish Games circuit. Knowing my wrestling involvement, Brian invited me to wrestle him - Scottish Games style - not *worked.* I agreed to do it for the hell of it because

I wasn't sure I could beat Brian. He had as much physical charisma as I'd seen - at six foot five and 275 pounds with his 37 inch waist, he looked chiseled out of granite. If you had seen his photo on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, you would know what I mean. The match lasted only five minutes. According to Scottish Games rules, the objective of the match is to take your opponent off his feet, and that's what I did: I caught him in a collegiate wrestling takedown from the standing position after we both *blew up* in five minutes. We laughed about it later over a few beers.

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No matter how much fun it was, I wasn't going to be making any money *shooting* with Brian and by now, my financial situation was desperate again. Looking for wrestling work, I called my friends Afa and Sika who were in Nashville, working for the Universal Wrestling Association, an *outlaw* promotion organized by Lou Thesz; in an odd turnabout, Lou was now competing against the NWA, specifically the NWA's regional promoter, Nick Gulas. When I told the Samoans I was looking for wrestling bookings, they suggested I call Lou, asking for work, and I did. Although I hadn't seen Lou for awhile, he remembered me from years earlier when we traveled and partied the Georgia circuit together. Lou said, "Oh yeah, Jim, you'd be great up here." In addition to the Samoans, Lou had Erik the Red, "Pistol" Pez Whatley, another black wrestler who played the steppin'-fetchet role, and Tommy Rich (Thomas Richardson), a nice looking blonde 18 year-old teenage heartthrob who was just breaking in. Lou was not wrestling on his own cards, but he *booked* for the promotion which was backed financially by Danny Davis of the Nashville Brass band. Lou said he'd guarantee me $450 a week to come to his Tennessee promotion. So I drove up there and wrestled in Nashville, Jackson, Memphis and Chattanooga for the four or five days they had booked, and drive back to spend weekends with Nita and the kids in Atlanta. Lou put me *over* immediately with a *push* as a legit hall of fame athlete on his TV show, talking about my election to the Georgia All Time Football Team as well as my Helms Foundation Hall of Fame designation.

One night after a Nashville match, I unexpectedly renewed my relationship with Big Bad John, the wrestlers' *pharmacist* who tried to overdose me in Australia. John was in Nashville wrestling for the NWA promotion *owned* by Nick Gulas, but he walked into our dressing room and gave me a surprisingly warm welcome. "Hey man, I ain't seen you since Australia. How you been?" It had been three years since the Australian tour, and an awful lot had happened since John and I drank cognac and ate speed throughout that memorable night in Sydney: I had kicked up a lot of dust in The Business by starting my own promotion and trying to organize a wrestlers' union. I was now known inside The Business as *white nigger,* a genuinely hated *heel.* Seeing John again that night in Nashville, I felt a cold chill: here was the man who brought me to within inches of being just another overdosed wrestler. Now, John was still with the NWA and I was on the outside looking in. I noticed John was slurring his speech, obviously both drunk and high when he said, "Come on man, I'm going to a party - it's a big Nashville country- western music thing. Let's go get us a couple drinks right now." I tried to be friendly and agreed to go to a bar with him, although I drove my own car because I didn't think he could handle it and I didn't trust him.

After we got to the bar, I told him I was planning to meet Afa and Sika at their house for a late dinner so I couldn't stay too long. We ordered drinks, and John quickly wolfed down two doubles. Wiping his chin, he leaned toward me. His sinister *heel* face as effective now as it was in the ring, and he pulled a pistol from inside his coat and stuck it in my face. Looking deep into my eyes he growled, "Ain't no one fucking with me." At which point he jammed the pistol's barrel under my nose and accused me of going to bed with his wife Linda. Linda had been an arena dolly in Sydney, and after I left Australia, John got involved with her and they married. I said, "No, John, I never touched Linda." He snorted, "Well that's not what I heard. And anybody that fucks with my wife, I'll kill 'em." I knew he was serious because he'd tried to lay me away once before. John growled, "Well come on, let's go to this party. You follow me." I tried to explain again that I was having dinner with Afa and Sika, but he was insistent. So I followed him for a few miles and then turned off the road, losing him. But there is no doubt in my mind that if I had gone with him that night in Nashville, I would never have come back. Several years later, John got involved with some drug traffickers in Los Angeles and ended up bleeding to death in his

bathtub after being stabbed. To my knowledge, his assailant was never apprehended and Big Bad John became just another wrestler who cashed in his chips under peculiar circumstances.

After three weeks in Lou's *outlaw* Tennessee territory, my weekly *payoff* dropped to $300, not $450. When I asked Lou about my money, he said, "Jim, I can't pay you more because we're buckin' the NWA and we're hurting." After I told him he'd lied to me, I left Nashville and returned to Atlanta's real estate business. Lou Thesz went out of the promotion business later in the year, and I didn't see him again until we appeared on Lifetime cable's *America Talks Back* nine years later.

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After getting *jobbed* by Thesz and resuming my work in Atlanta real estate sales and rentals, I continued looking for wrestling bookings on the side with small independent promotions. One of these was a group put together by Sally Stennett, a Florida woman who had some money and thought she could make more of it in wrestling promotion. She offered me a contract with a guaranteed weekly draw plus six percent against the house, and I did some shows for her in small towns - Marietta, Statesboro, Blue Ridge. To make extra money, I *doubled* - I wrestled as both a *babyface* and masked *heel* on the same card. Early in the show, I'd have a match as Big Jim Wilson, The All American Kid. Afterward, I returned to the dressing room and climbed into long tights, a shirt with sleeves and a mask and wrestled as The Super Destroyer in the main event. The ploy must have fooled everyone since the *heat* was intense, according to the local cops whose job was to keep fans out of the ring.

But these little wrestling shows were very small potatoes compared to what Georgia Championship was doing, and I was not making much money in either wrestling or Atlanta real estate, which was in a slump at the time. At this point, my wrestling skills - *working ability* - had developed to the point where I could work as either *babyface* or *heel,* having learned how to control the crowd. I had become a more polished performer and I wanted to use those skills in a world of wrestling that was closed to me - I couldn't wrestle and I couldn't promote. So I decided to *shoot* in September 1976

when I filed an antitrust lawsuit in federal court against the National Wrestling Alliance, Georgia Championship Wrestling, Jim Barnett, Eddie Graham, Paul Jones, Tom Renesto and Fred Ward. My lawsuit alleged the NWA illegally monopolized wrestling by protecting its members against competition and by dividing and allocating wrestling territories among its members and by stifling competition by concerted refusals to deal and by getting exclusive leases on wrestling facilities. Interestingly, my attorneys decided not to mention sexual harassment, a legal challenge that was not then common in American litigation.

Shortly after filing my lawsuit, a lawyer at one of Atlanta's expensive law firms (Kilpatrick & Cody) telephoned to say his firm was involved in preliminary work for yet another antitrust lawsuit against Georgia Championship and the National Wrestling Alliance. At first, he wouldn't identify the client's name but I knew who it was - Ann Gunkel; when we got beyond those lawyerly niceties about protecting client confidentiality, we got down to business: Ann's lawyers had been doing their own investigation of the NWA's illegal conduct during the Battle For Atlanta, which involved the same time frame covered by my lawsuit; in Ann's case, her lawyers hadn't yet filed suit because they had more time (and Ann's money) to spend on their investigation, which included examination of court papers already filed by my lawyer. Now, the pitch from Kilpatrick & Cody was that the two of us - our attorneys - might work informally together by sharing information since our respective legal claims named the same NWA defendants during the same time frame as The Battle For Atlanta.

I agreed, and told my lawyer to cooperate with Ann's attorneys - she was fighting for the same thing in the same war and why shouldn't we help each other? Later, during one of those interchanges between my lawyer and Ann's, my attorney revealed what later proved to be a smoking gun for Ann's case: *Jim Wilson witnessed a meeting at Ray Gunkel's old booking office on Friday, November24,1972 when the NWA's conspiracy to drive Ann out of the wrestling business was designed.* When Ann's attorneys learned I was *present at the creation* of NWA plans to squeeze Ann out of Ray's old promotion, they asked me to be a witness for their side, and after I testified under oath about what I heard and saw that day, one of Ann's attorneys said, "We just won this case."

About two months later, Ann Gunkel filed her own suit against the NWA, Georgia Championship Wrestling and its owners. All of a sudden, the NWA and Georgia Championship Wrestling had to spend money to hire their own lawyers to defend themselves in two lawsuits. When Jim Barnett retained former Georgia Governor Carl E. Sanders as defense attorney for both suits, my lawyer said Ann Gunkel and I were in for a long, expensive haul. Sanders' firm (Troutman, Sanders, Lockerman & Ashmore) was Atlanta's largest with Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. one its principal clients; both Ted Turner and Carl Sanders cast a large shadow over Atlanta's legal community and later, when I wanted to replace my lawyer, it was difficult to find attorneys in Georgia who were willing to go head-to-head with Sanders and Turner.

His name may have meant little outside Georgia, but Carl Sanders had local clout. He began his political career as a Georgia state representative in late 1950s and was a state senator from 1959 to 1962. He had been Georgia governor from 1963 to 1967, and I first met him during my football days at the University of Georgia, where he was remembered for building a new jock dorm with air conditioning for Coach Dooley's football players. In 1970, Sanders staged a comeback campaign for the Georgia governorship against Jimmy Carter who gave Sanders the name "Cuff Links Carl" in a particularly nasty Democratic primary. Sanders lost that election but created a law firm empire for himself at Troutman, Sanders, Lockerman & Ashmore by acting as its chief rainmaker - he brought in a lot of business for the firm, becoming powerful and rich in the process. His "clout," said *The Atlanta Journal* in 1979, is "legendary, encompassing Georgia's political hierarchy and business elite." His firm's other clients included Georgia Power, the Atlanta Hawks, the Atlanta Braves and the Omni Arena. Sanders delegated legal work for the wrestling lawsuits to his partner Tench Coxe, a corporate lawyer who worked in the antitrust area and who ultimately became an officer in Georgia Championship Wrestling.

Ann Gunkel also was represented by a large silk-stocking Atlanta law firm, Kilpatrick & Cody, with expensive corporate attorneys Miles Alexander, James H. Coil III and Robert Shields. By contrast, my attorneys, and there would eventually be six of them, one at a time, were all small office lawyers who depended on walk-in business for clients without much money seeking divorces, wills and house-closings. There wasn't one

antitrust specialist among them because I couldn't afford one, and if it hadn't been for the legal profession's custom of paying an attorney a 40% contingency fee in a treble damage award, none of them would have given me so much as a citation for the Sherman Act. That, I learned, is one aspect of the high price of justice in this nation to ordinary people.

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While lawyers prepared for the trials, I turned attention to something I knew about: generating *heat.* To increase public awareness of wrestling's abuses, I decided to organize a picket of Jim Barnett's Atlanta wrestling shows outside the City Auditorium on Friday nights and it was joined by my son Josh and some neighborhood kids who loved wrestling. For eight long months, from January's snow and ice through the searing heat of August 1977, we walked through the gathering wrestling crowds with signs and petitions, urging fans not to go inside (where T-Bolt was again wrestling, now as one of Georgia Championship's tag team champions with Mr. Wrestling II, Johnny Walker). I was soon joined by a local black minister, Rev. Joe Boone who had his own pickets and since his civil rights cause was not that different from mine, we picketed together.

After a few months, my weekly picket attracted the attention of Steve Somers, a local sports reporter for Atlanta's WXIA-TV, Channel 11. Somers taped a brief segment on my crusade to clean up wrestling. He seemed to think my cause was interesting, especially after he interviewed President Jimmy Carter's mother, Miz Lillian. The President's mother was now a celebrity wrestling fan in Georgia, and Somers asked her in a televised interview what she thought about the wrestler on the picket line. Miz Lillian told him, "Oh, I love that boy. Him and Thunderbolt Patterson." The folks who parked their pickup trucks next to the long, black limousine outside the small arenas in Americus, Albany and Columbus already knew about the state's most famous wrestling fan. Then Somers scheduled another TV taping with me and a representative from the other side. For this assignment, Jim Barnett's aging *front man* Paul Jones was designated to be Georgia Championship's spokesman, not Barnett who was never seen on camera. But when Jones showed up at WXIA-TV studios for the taping, the

station's management abruptly canceled the show. All that Somers would tell me was, "Jim, it's out of my hands. It was canceled upstairs." The *politics of wrestling* in Georgia was beginning to reveal itself.

I continued to picket with my merry band of neighborhood kids who were getting their first lesson in the politics of labor relations. A few weeks later, we were joined by my old friend Zulu (Ron Pope), the big, good looking black bodybuilder who hadn't been able to find steady wrestling work since our IWL folded in 1974. I hadn't seen or talked with Zulu for about three years, so he brought me up to date on what he'd been doing. Like the rest of the wrestlers who worked with our IWL a few years earlier, Zulu got a lot of *heat* for working with a non-NWA promotion and so I invited Zulu to join my Friday night picket of Georgia Championship Wrestling. He did and brought a big sign that had a billiard eightball painted on it with the words *"I have been blackballed."* Zulu's size and sign attracted attention in downtown Atlanta, but he couldn't afford to continue picketing with no income. When Zulu said he'd found wrestling work in the Alabama territory and wanted to leave for Mobile, I understood. But after a few weeks of wrestling in Alabama, Rev. Joe Boone tracked him down, offering to pay Zulu to return to Atlanta and rejoin me on the picket line. Boone admitted he'd been bought off the picket line earlier by Barnett and apparently now had second thoughts about his deal with the devil. Rev. Boone gave Zulu $500 for apartment rent and $100 a week to picket.

So, Zulu joined my picket on Friday nights in Atlanta and wrestled in Alabama the rest of the week. After four or five weeks of picketing, Zulu was approached by Barnett and Ole Anderson, who told him if he'd get off the picket, they'd find him work. I wasn't surprised when Jay West, Barnett's ring announcer but a loyal friend, said, "Jim, they're trying to break you and Ron up." A few days later, Zulu said Barnett had arranged for him to wrestle in Tennessee, and he was leaving. I said, "Zulu, you've got to do what you've got to do," and he left. Tennessee booker Robert Fuller had told Zulu they'd use him one night a week, Friday nights in Knoxville for $250, but when he got to Knoxville, Fuller said Zulu wouldn't be wrestling - they only wanted him to sit in the audience, but they'd still pay him $250 in cash. At that point, Zulu realized he was being paid to stay 250 miles away from Atlanta. And that was the last I saw of Zulu for several years.

By 1977, wrestlers around the country were calling the Atlanta booking office, asking for work with Jim Barnett's Georgia Championship Wrestling. The circuit's new popularity came from RCA's SATCOM I satellite which had uplinked Ted Turner's WTCG- TV a few months earlier in December 1976 to become Turner Broadcasting System (TBS). Although others in the broadcast industry laughed at Turner *("Why should we worry about Turner when his top program is Saturday night wrestling?"* snorted CBS Entertainment president Bob Daly), TBS sales manager Gerry Hogan said, "There's no prestige to wrestling, but you can't beat it as a ratings success. It has more viewers than football or the Braves or the Hawks." By now, TBS's *Georgia Championship Wrestling* was seen around the country, and wrestlers offered to do anything for electronic stardom on TV's superstation. In the meantime, Ted Turner was winning the America's Cup in *Courageous* while I continued to picket Atlanta's weekly wrestling show on Friday nights.

During the spring of 1977, I later learned, Georgia Championship's arena revenue was down considerably from the previous year. The new NWA champion Harley Race had gates of only $18,000 and $13,000 in March and April. The biggest Atlanta show of the year was an Omni event in July that drew over $76,000; of that, the largest *payoff* went to Andre The Giant ($2,000) with T-Bolt and four others getting $1,250 - Ole and Arn Anderson, Mr. Wrestling II (Johnny Walker) and Dick Slater. T-Bolt felt good: Dusty got only $900. Three future world champions got $750 (Ric Flair), $250 (Ricky Steamboat) and $200 (Randy Savage). I don't know whether my weekly pickets were affecting Barnett's crowd size and gates, but I do know that my pending lawsuit - and Ann Gunkel's lawsuit - was costing Barnett a lot of money; Carl Sanders and Tench Coxe and the army of lawyers at Troutman Sanders did not come cheap.

While picketing one night in August 1977, I recognized Barnett's unique silhouette and delicate gait outside City Auditorium. When our eyes met, he meandered toward me. "Oh, Jim my boy," he began. "I wonder if we could talk sometime?" "Sure," I said. "When?" "How about next

Tuesday at the Commerce Club for lunch?" he said. We met for lunch the following week and had a pleasant and amiable conversation devoid of reference to the incident in Australia. Barnett seemed friendly: "I've always liked you, my boy. Thought you were a great talent. We weren't able to get together before, but that's the past. Hopefully, we can get together now," Barnett said. Then Barnett asked how my job was going at Barton & Ludwig, the large Atlanta real estate syndicate. I was surprised Barnett knew about my position there, but I told him I was enjoying my work and had developed an executive home rental program for the company. I didn't think much about it at the time, but Barnett seemed to go out of his way to say he had some very good friends at Barton & Ludwig, three men who ran the property management department and who, office gossip had it, were gay. As before, being told that somebody was gay or straight didn't mean anything to me but when Barnett named his friends, I surmised their friendship may have been associated with a shared lifestyle.

My discussion with Barnett about Barton & Ludwig was brief, and I didn't bother to tell him how well I was doing outside wrestling. In fact, my executive home rental program had been received so favorably I'd been promised 50% participation in its profits. I was doing well for myself, and I didn't tell Barnett that the job security gave me the strength and incentive to pursue the fight for *wrestlers' freedom* on my Friday night picket line. But my continuing picket while I worked at Barton & Ludwig had become controversial in my own family. My brother-in-law Mel, for one, advised me to forget about picketing and wrestlers' rights and get on with my life outside wrestling. Mel may have been more tuned into local politics than I, and he put it to me straight: "Look," he said, "You've got a great position in Atlanta real estate and you may be shooting yourself in the foot by moonlighting in local politics. You know how these things work," he said. "This city's movers and shakers talk to each other all the time. Don't do something stupid." But I ignored Mel's advice, arguing that principles were more important than politics, although I later regretted my decision to continue the picket and ignore its political ramifications.

Barnett and I continued to exchange friendly small talk throughout lunch until Barnett asked me point blank what he could possibly do to persuade me to drop my lawsuit which, he said, was getting expensive and time consuming. I told him I wanted to wrestle again, that I wanted main

events which were then paying between $1,200 and $1,500 a week. I also asked for the opportunity to do some promoting on my own. Barnett seemed receptive to my proposals, suggesting he and I co-promote some wrestling shows in south Georgia, operating out of Valdosta. I told him I was interested.

Then I told him I had an *angle* for Georgia Championship - a world championship match in Fulton County Stadium between me and then NWA world champion Harley Race. I told Barnett there was genuine *heat* to my relationship with Harley, and a lot of Georgia wrestling fans knew about it. Laughing, I told him I was prepared to go either way with Harley - to *work* or *shoot.* But Barnett said he didn't think that *angle* would draw well, saying he'd never drawn 20,000 people anywhere. But, he said, I would be used *on top* in other matches. Then Barnett enriched his offer when he asked if I would like to do some public relations work for him, possibly writing a weekly column on pro wrestling for the *Atlanta Constitution.* He said he could arrange it with his billionaire friend Anne Cox Chambers whose family owned the newspaper. I said, "Fine, love to do it!"

After lunch, we walked back to Barnett's office to finalize the details of our agreement. At that point, Barnett added a condition to our agreement - he couldn't get me back into Georgia Championship Wrestling until after the first of the year, nearly three months away. When I objected, he offered to have his *booker* Ole Anderson get me bookings in Texas, Alabama and Oklahoma. But when I told Barnett I wanted to wrestle in Georgia to be close to home and family, Barnett said he'd work on it. Then Barnett added another condition to our agreement: although he promised everything else we had discussed, he didn't want to memorialize it formally in writing because "I never want it known that I capitulated to you." He said, "*My word is my bond.* You can rely on me. Drop the lawsuit and give me two or three months for this thing to die down and then, we'll put you back in." Although Barnett sounded sincere, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to return to wrestling in the worst way, but dismissing my lawsuit was a very big step, conceivably a step backward with no formal assurances from Barnett and Georgia Championship. I told Barnett I'd think about his offer.

A few weeks later, Barton & Ludwig vice president Tom Griffin called me into his office when I asked Chandler Barton for a partnership contract that formalized our verbal agreement. Griffin told me to clear out my desk,

I'd been fired. It was an odd and unexpectedly quick ending to a business partnership that had been publicized in the regional real estate trade journal. Later, I surmised that Barnett had concluded that I would be more inclined to drop my lawsuit if I were unemployed, and he arranged with his friends at Barton & Ludwig to do just that. Today, Barton & Ludwig is Coldwell Banker, and its home rental department is the largest and most profitable in the southeast. After being terminated by Barton & Ludwig, I took a long, hard look at my situation. I was unemployed again, which caused Nita to press for divorce. Losing my family was something I wanted to avoid at any cost. On the other hand, my lawsuit against the NWA and Georgia Championship was dragging. It was now a year old and I didn't have the money to pay lawyers to investigate further, collect documents and depose witnesses which a complicated antitrust and restraint of trade lawsuit required. I had already lost one attorney who quit when I couldn't give him the cash advance he wanted. Before finding another attorney, I had represented myself *pro se* to keep my lawsuit alive. The second attorney had not yet done much work, and most of the pre- trial legal work wasn't even started so not a lot would be lost if I dismissed the suit. On the other hand, Barnett wouldn't put our agreement in writing, which bothered me, of course. What could I do? That's the way the wrestling business was in those days - nothing in writing.

What I did then doesn't make sense today, but I was so despondent and so stressed that I was vulnerable to poor judgment: I accepted Barnett's offer, figuring if I could work a deal with Barnett, I could make some money and get my life back together. I had already lost my job and if I didn't find another one soon, I was going to lose my family. I thought I could save my family more grief if I accepted Barnett's peace offer and got back into wrestling. If I could make $1,200 to $1,500 a week in wrestling, my immediate problems would be solved. So I called Barnett, saying I was ready to accept his offer to dismiss my lawsuit, but my attorney was out of town. Barnett told me that wasn't a problem and I should contact his lawyer, Tench Coxe. Not knowing any better - that I should never have done this without consulting my own attorney - I dismissed my antitrust lawsuit with a signed release at Coxe's office in September 1977. My own attorney didn't know what I had done until he returned from a month vacation in Europe, and when I told him, he was livid. Later, there was considerable discussion among the lawyers about Tench Coxe'sprofessional

ethics in orchestrating my *uncounselled* release, but Coxe insisted he didn't know my attorney was not consulted.

I went home to our apartment that night and told Nita I'd reached an agreement with Barnett to return to wrestling in two or three months, if not before. But by now she hated my involvement with wrestling because of all the grief it caused our family and my return to wrestling didn't change her view about the divorce, which was granted in late 1977. When she told me to move out, I asked to stay for two months so I could spend Christmas with the kids. She agreed but it was a heartbreaking holiday for all of us and there weren't many gifts under the Christmas tree.

Now living alone, I was even more impatient to return to wrestling and a steady income. After Barnett's three-months-for-this-thing-to- die-down moratorium had passed, I called Barnett's *booker* Ole Anderson for my bookings. Ole gave me the stall. "We don't have any openings right now," he said. "Well, that's not what Barnett told me. He said I was going to work," I replied. "Well you talk to Barnett, then," Ole said. So I called Barnett, who also gave me the stall. The same old "Be patient, my boy." Then, he put me back on the phone with Ole. "I'm all booked up for *the next year*Ole said. Here we go again, I thought - finally realizing I'd been a *mark* for not only the wrestling promoters and their lawyers, but the *bookers*, too. When I'd been conned again, I came to a new appreciation of the old wrestling cliche, *everything's a work.* For the next three long months, I called Barnett every week and I was told he was not available on each of those calls. Finally, on a day in April, he took my call and told me to stop pestering him, that I was bothering him. When I reminded him of our agreement, he snapped, "If you don't like it, sue me!" And he slammed down the telephone. That was the last time I talked with wrestling's *godfather,* but I accepted his challenge to sue him *again* a year and half later when I re-filed my antitrust lawsuit with one additional count: *Jim Barnett's breach of promise and fraudulent conduct.* I asked for a $2 million judgment in actual damages and another $2 million in punitive damages.

Later that month, the wrestling business was slapped with yet another antitrust lawsuit, this one brought by the Poffo family - Angelo, the aging wrestling star of the 1950s and 1960s, and his two sons Lanny Poffo and Randy “Macho Man” Savage. The Poffos asked for a $2.4 million judgment against nine wrestling promotions and 13 individual promoters for establishing an *illegal monopoly* that *allocated territories*, *boycotted* the Poffos’ promotion, and *blacklisted* the Poffos from wrestling elsewhere. The reasons for the Poffo lawsuit against the wrestling business were interesting. Soon after I met them in 1974, Randy was released by the Cincinnati Reds and joined his father and brother in running an independent promotion in Kentucky and Tennessee. They were real business people; if they weren’t treated right by other promoters, they’d start their own promotion.

The NWA regarded the Poffos as *outlaws*, of course. With three of them (Randy had not yet married Elizabeth Hewitt, his *manageress),* they didn't need many more guys to have a troupe. And they made money. When they put on shows at the Rupp Arena in Lexington, they brought in $30,000 a night. By 1972, the Poffos also were promoting in other cities across Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee against NWA promoters who thought they *owned* that area. According to court papers, an NWA boycott against the Poffos was organized by Nick Gulas, who told other NWA promoters the same thing he told The Sheik: "Don't give Angelo Poffo no wrestlers." Unlike others, however, The Sheik was a contrary son of a gun and agreed to wrestle for the Poffos for his usual 8% of the gates, although The Sheik's appearances were then canceled after he got phone calls from Gulas, Jim Barnett and Eddie Graham, who ordered him to "stay out of that territory," The Sheik later testified.

The Poffo promotion survived for several years despite NWA attempts to *kill* it, and legal proceedings again revealed much about pro wrestling's real mayhem outside the ring. At the center of NWA plots to eliminate the Poffos was - Jim Barnett. One night in 1976, Barnett asked Ronnie Garvin "if it was possible" for him "to hurt Randy Poffo," Ronnie Garvin later testified. Ronnie added, "That he would sort of make it worthwhile, that I would be taken care of in the future.

I said that it could be arranged." About three months afterward, Ronnie Garvin wrestled Randy Poffo in a tag match in Columbia, South Carolina and Ronnie revealed under oath what happened that night: "We started a fight. I mean it was on the level. *I tried to hurt him, taking a cement block and tried to crush him with it"* But Ronnie Garvin's contract *stretching* of Randy Poffo didn't stop the Poffos' *opposition* promotion, nor did it discourage Jim Barnett and Eddie Graham from taking additional steps to rub out the Poffo promotion.

A year later in 1977, Eddie Graham and Jim Barnett decided it was time to finally *kill* Angelo Poffo's popular appeal as a wrestler. They looked through their TV files for videotape of Angelo Poffo losing but found none. With no tape that could be used to discredit Angelo's wrestling ability, they decided to make one. But since Angelo was wise to the ways of the wrestling world, the scheme to induce him into a TV taping in which he lost required careful planning. Graham and Barnett devised a plot in which they

would make a let-bygones-be- bygones offer to Poffo to come back to the NWA and work a *program* around the country with then NWA champion Harley Race. Angelo would be told that in order to do that, a tape was needed of Angelo and Harley wrestling and it was decided to create this tape at Graham's weekly *Championship Wrestling From Florida* TV show on WTVT-TV in Tampa. The plot involved asking Angelo to do a *screw-job* loss to Harley Race - a controversial finish - after which Graham and Barnett would have the tape edited down to eight minutes with a Gordon Solie voiceover and commentary about Angelo Poffo being "over the hill." The tape would be shown around the country to bring an end to Angelo's wrestling career and as insurance that Angelo didn't become an attraction in Japan, Barnett and Graham planned to tape a similar match between Angelo and Japan's Giant Baba. Again, Angelo would be told the NWA wanted him to work a *program* with Baba and videotape was needed to hype the *program;* again, Angelo would be told to do a *screw-job* loss to Baba and the tape would be edited down to a few minutes with the same kind of voiceover.

Unfortunately for Jim Barnett and Eddie Graham, their conspiring conversation to *kill* the wrestling reputation of Angelo Poffo occurred in the presence of the Florida *booker* and wrestler Bob Roop, who later recounted it under oath. Bob later testified: "They felt with these two matches in the bag, so to speak, that they would have a club to hold over his [Angelo Poffo's] head and could bring him to terms where he wouldn't give them trouble anymore. I was sitting in the office with them while they were talking. And they delineated their motive. They said what they wanted it for - another way to *thumb* - the word used was *to squash* the man. Another *thumb*," Bob testified.

But Angelo Poffo proved too smart for the scam, and the planned tapes were never made. Nonetheless, the Poffos took the NWA's other hardball tactics public and sued Barnett, Graham and eleven other promoters who allegedly cooperated with the boycotting, blacklisting and physical threats - Nick Gulas, George Gulas, Tom Renesto, Jerry Jarrett, Jerry Lawler, Wilbur Snyder, Dick The Bruiser, Eddie "The Sheik" Farhat, Verne Gagne, Buddy Fuller and Robert Geigel, then NWA president. Of the 13 defendants, all but four (Renesto, Farhat, Snyder and Bruiser) retained Jim Barnett and Ted Turner's Atlanta law firm headed by Carl Sanders as defense counsel.

Now, with three antitrust suits filed against it, the NWA faced an unholy trinity of trouble: the prospect of damaging trial publicity and huge legal expenses. And of all the persons connected to this avalanche of legal assaults against The Business, nobody had more to lose than Jim Barnett who was named a defendant in *all* of them. Eventually, the millions of dollars spent for legal fees set the stage for a fatal rift between Barnett and his NWA partners and it led ultimately to the destruction of Georgia Championship Wrestling.

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As the three lawsuits were grinding toward trial, I located my old friend Thunderbolt Patterson one night in early 1981. When I reached him by telephone in Asheville, North Carolina, he brought me up to date on how the wrestling world was treating him. I hadn't seen T-Bolt since 1977 when I was outside Atlanta's City Auditorium and Omni Arena picketing Barnett's Friday night matches and T-Bolt was inside, defending his Georgia tag team championship with his partner Tommy Rich and later, Tony Atlas. A lot had happened since then, and he brought me up to date. T-Bolt said Georgia Championship had treated him pretty well in 1977 when he worked steadily and made about $48,000 for the year; the next year, he was the Georgia TV champion for a few months and did a tour of Australia where they let him beat Mark Lewin (for the "Continental Wrestling Association World Heavyweight Championship") in Melbourne; he said he earned about $46,000 for the year.

When he resumed wrestling for Georgia Championship, however, he again faced the continuing booking shuffle routine with Dusty. When Dusty wanted to work Atlanta, T-Bolt had to get lost and wrestle in a tank town; if Dusty wasn't interested in Atlanta, then T-Bolt could work. After awhile, the demeaning treatment again started to eat at T- Bolt, who was not a member of the wrestlers' inner circle - guys like the Andersons, Briscos, Watts and Rhodes who got cash in envelopes, travel expenses and world championship belts. From T-Bolt's perspective, the wrestling clique was a white buddy system. In March 1979, Dusty Rhodes had come to Georgia Championship for a week of bookings and a big show at the Omni, where

Dusty and six other wrestlers were given *payoffs* of $1,500 but T-Bolt was paid $600; for his entire week of bookings in Georgia, Dusty's total *payoff* was $3,250, and T-Bolt was given less than half of what Dusty made - $1,140. As was his practice when he discovered he wasn't being treated fairly, T-Bolt complained. Just as predictable, his Georgia bookings then dropped to where he was wrestling two and three shows a week for a little over $300. When his weekly *payoffs* dropped to $160 and then $60, he quit.

T-Bolt drove to Tennessee where his friend Robert Fuller (Robert Welch) *booked* the Memphis wrestling office for Jerry Jarrett and Buddy Fuller (Welch). Robert was based in Knoxville, then the scene of another minor promotional war involving an *opposition* group run by Bob Roop and Ron Garvin. While working in Knoxville, T-Bolt confided to Robert one night that he *really* wanted to become world champion. But Robert told him, "Bolt, that's not going to happen - not with Eddie Graham, Barnett, the Crocketts and Watts. *They think you're just an ignorantnigger.* In their eyes, you don't even have a right to sit down and talk with them - with people who have money and authority."

About a month later, Jim Barnett and Eddie Graham decided to switch the NWA's world belt in Tampa and champion Harley Race dropped the *strap* to T-Bolt's nemesis - Dusty Rhodes. It was just a temporary change, intended to boost business in Florida, and Harley won it back a week later in Orlando. But I know it bothered T-Bolt. In his wrestling career, he had seen the NWA's champions come and go: Gene Kiniski, Dory Funk, Jr., Harley Race, Jack Brisco, Terry Funk and now Dusty. He had wrestled all of them in main events around the country, but no one in the NWA had ever seriously considered giving him the belt, even on an interim basis. He had wrestled main events most of his career because he could fill up the arenas, but he was never regarded as championship material. There had never been a black world champion in wrestling, and it would stay that way for a long, long time.

There also were some developing problems with white wrestlers who were asked to do *jobs* for T-Bolt and take the *bumps* that T-Bolt could no longer perform. One night in the Monroe, Louisiana dressing room, wrestler Tank Patton stormed into a conversation between T-Bolt and Watts, yelling, "I don't care what the promoters think if they fire me now or never. I'm tired of this nigger!" T-Bolt tried to walk away until Patton slugged him. T-

Bolt struck back and Watts, laughing said, “Let them go ahead and fight” while wrestlers Tony Atlas, Dusty Rhodes, Johnny Walker and Ernie Ladd watched and laughed; Atlas and Ladd are black, of course. T-Bolt worked one more match for Watts and quit. But when he called around for work in other NWA territories, no one would use him. In the absence of steady wrestling dates, T-Bolt headed for California. When NWA promoters Mike LeBell and Roy Shire refused to give him work, he joined Zulu, Bearcat Wright, Rich Thompson and Don Ross in a racial discrimination complaint filed with the NAACP and, ultimately, the California State Athletic Commission.

In the meantime, T-Bolt got a job as night security guard and janitor for the *Los Angeles Times.* During the day, he tried to find wrestling bookings but the message was the same everywhere he called. Finally, Ernie Ladd telephoned T-Bolt in late 1980 to tell him Georgia *booker* Ole Anderson wanted to use both of them as a tag team, and possibly tag champions. T-Bolt left for Atlanta but he wrestled on only three shows. He was paid $90 for a match in Macon and $175 for a match in Marietta and $185 for a match in Augusta. T-Bolt again called Rhodes for bookings in Florida but Dusty told him, “Eddie [Graham] don’t want to be bothered with you.” “At that point”, T-Bolt said, “I came to the conclusion that I had no place in wrestling. I could get no work nowhere.” Desperate for work, he contacted his old friend Bearcat Wright who invited him to work as a construction laborer in Charlotte. So, T-Bolt cut concrete for $250 a week at the Charlotte airport.

Finally, The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) agreed to book T-Bolt in his Detroit-based promotion. But The Sheik’s extensive territory included Michigan, Ohio and parts of Canada, and the long *jumps* created difficult travel logistics for T-Bolt who lived in North Carolina. When I talked with T-Bolt on the phone one night, I could tell his constant travel was taking its toll, and he sounded tired and discouraged. On one of his long *jumps* in early 1981, T-Bolt stopped in Atlanta to see me, exhausted. I asked him if he knew his friend Robert Fuller was in town, now booking for Georgia Championship. T-Bolt said he’d spoken with Robert three months earlier when T-Bolt had asked for work and Robert explained, “Bolt, there’s no way I can do that. You’re trouble, here.”

I wanted to help my old friend whose problems with The Business were even more insidious than mine; T-Bolt's difficulties were *ascribed* on the basis of his color whereas mine were *achieved* because of what I refused to do. When I suggested he talk with Georgia Championship's *booker* Robert Fuller again, T-Bolt let me drive him over to Ted Turner's WTBS-TV studios where Robert was taping a Barnett wrestling show. T-Bolt told Robert he wanted to talk and Robert asked us to come to his apartment later that evening. When we met with Robert, he said he didn't have much time because he was on his way out of town to return to Florida to help his dad fight the *opposition* promotion of Louie Tillet and Don Curtis. T-Bolt got right to the point: he needed work and Robert replied, "I'd like to use both you guys, but it's out of my hands." Then T-Bolt again told Robert he was looking for a booking job and Robert said, " Bolt, Jim Barnett and Eddie Graham cannot *conceive* of you booking. You might as well forget about it."

Later in 1981, Thunderbolt Patterson filed a complaint with Georgia's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. When the EEOC investigated and interviewed Jim Barnett, Barnett convinced them that Claude Patterson was a troublemaker - an unreliable employee who missed matches, didn't show up on time, got into dressing room fights and then blamed his difficulties on racism. The EEOC case was closed. Afterward, I invited T-Bolt to move into my new home with Nita and the kids in Atlanta while he continued to look for wrestling work; as everyone in my family had predicted, Nita and I remarried in 1979 and some stability returned to our lives. And I was feeling like giving the wrestling business another go. I told T-Bolt we should resurrect our IWL and try wrestling promotion once more. T- Bolt agreed and he and his old dog Sam moved in with the eight of us.

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After family supper on those long spring nights, T-Bolt and I sat in the living room, talking about our prior experiences in the wrestling business. We rehashed our ill-fated 1974 Omni show and other experiences of that year and tried to focus on what we learned from them. Out of this mutual

soul-bearing came the idea that if we were to pursue our promotional aspirations again, we needed T-Bolt's pal The Sheik to join us.

By 1981, The Sheik was still one of wrestling's star *heels* but his legendary wrestling fortune had dwindled, partly a casualty of some expensive divorces. Throughout the 1960s, The Sheik's blood circus had pushed Michigan's wrestling business to new levels of prosperity. He also had taken his act to other NWA territories where he often was invited to work when attendance sagged. And The Sheik literally scared wrestling fans into their seats for 8% of the gates, his standard fee. But The Sheik's big money was made in promotion, which he entered in the early 1960s when he bought the NWA's Detroit area promotion from Jim Barnett and John Doyle for $50,000. The Detroit booking office was a large one, extending into Ohio, West Virginia, upper Michigan and part of Canada. Later, The Sheik was offered partnership interest in Jack Tunney's Toronto promotion in exchange for booking the shows and wrestling on them. By the early 1970s, The Sheik was said to be one of the wealthiest men in wrestling, having reportedly accumulated a fortune of $10 million in about 13 years. Other wrestlers who saw his Cadillacs or his 40-room mansion in Williamston or the racetrack he owned were envious of his success. But then his Detroit promotion declined sharply in 1977 when local auto industries retrenched, laying off thousands of blue collar workers. By the late 1970s, Detroit's Cobo Hall crowds were so small they barely paid arena and TV costs. Some said The Sheik's problems had less to do with Detroit's sagging economy than with Farhat's own booking - *burning out* the territory by *pushing* himself with a xenophobic and bloody Arab *heel* act that had grown stale.

But The Sheik blamed Jim Barnett and Ted Turner for his troubles, and I could see his point. Slowly, but surely, Turner's WTBS-TV and its *Georgia Championship Wrestling* was moving across the country into Ohio and Michigan, the territory The Sheik thought he *owned*. By 1981, WTBS was reaching 20 million households around the nation. With nationalization, the Georgia promotion changed the name of its TV show from *Georgia Championship Wrestling* to *World Championship Wrestling*, a two-hour weekly program hosted by Eddie Graham's announcing acolyte, Gordon Solie. As WTBS penetrated every market in the country, Georgia wrestlers followed with tours into Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia,

Maryland, Texas, New Mexico and Pennsylvania. With the Georgia onslaught, The Sheik lost his TV shows in Detroit, Cincinnati, Flint and Parkersburg, West Virginia to Barnett. Then he was squeezed out of the NWA's Toronto promotion when Jack Tunney sold his interest to Jim Crockett. At about this time, The Sheik left the NWA's mainstream. While he continued to wrestle lucrative Japan tours, The Sheik now also worked for NWA competitors - the small *outlaw* promotions. He wrestled on little shows for The Wildman (Dave McKigney) in Ontario, Canada, and he tried to work for Louie Tillet and Don Curtis in Tampa and Jacksonville where they ran a promotion in *opposition* to the NWA's Eddie Graham, who stopped The Sheikfrom wrestling in Florida by bringing him to Tampa and requesting a phoney letter of explanation in case Graham was ever sued over it.

So when T-Bolt asked The Sheik to join us as a partner in our revitalized IWL at about this time, he said, "Sure, let's do it." We gave him stock in our company and promised him his 8% for wrestling in main events. We also contacted Louie Tillet and Don Curtis about exchanging talent, and they agreed to help us because we both had to use wrestling's relatively small group of *outlaw* wrestlers. When Louie Tillet offered to be our *booker* and The Sheik agreed to be our partner, the key elements of a new joint venture fell into place.

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My registration of The Professional Wrestlers' Association with the Georgia Department of Labor in 1981 caught the attention of Beau Bock, an Atlanta radio and TV sportscaster. Bock, whose real name is Walter Maher, did sports commentary on both WQXI radio and WAGA-TV in Atlanta, and he wanted to know how the wrestlers' union came about. Beau was interested because he had done some pro wrestling himself, working as Dutch Treat in New York indy shows for a brief time. I told him about wrestlers' problems with compensation, the rampant blacklisting and absence of benefits for the wrestlers. Knowledgeable about the financial structure of pro football, baseball and basketball, Beau thought the treatment of wrestlers was scandalous. He became interested in publicizing

the *"freedom issues in pro wrestling"* as I had taken to calling our mission, and he produced a 15-part interview with me that played for a week on one of Atlanta's hottest radio stations in 1981.

A few days after the series was broadcast, I introduced Beau to Thunderbolt Patterson. When T-Bolt told Beau about his blacklisting, Beau acted incredulous. T-Bolt said, "Let me show you what I'm talking about. Mind if I use your phone?" Beau said, "Go ahead." T-Bolt suggested that Beau get on the other phone to listen and turn on the studio's tape recorder while he placed a call to Robert Fuller and Buck Robley, then *bookers* for Georgia Championship. While Beau listened, T-Bolt said, " Robert, I need work." And Robert replied, " Bolt, I can't use you." Then T-Bolt placed a call to Jerry Brisco, his former tag partner in the Carolinas and now *booker* for Eddie Graham in Florida. T-Bolt said, " Jerry, I need work. Can you use me?" Brisco replied, "I can't use you." T-Bolt responded, "Come on Jerry, I was one of the top five drawing cards in wrestling." And Brisco said, "I know that, but I just can't get you booked right now." Next, T-Bolt placed a call to Jim Crockett in Charlotte, asking for work. Crockett said, "I don't think so. You'll have to talk with George Scott." T-Bolt called Scott the *booker* who said, "We've got black guys in here now, and don't need anymore. Call back, later." Then, T-Bolt called Ole Anderson who told him to "see George."

When T-Bolt got off the phone, he told Beau he wanted to make one more call - to Jim Barnett in downtown Atlanta. As Beau listened on another phone with the tape recorder running, Barnett told T-Bolt he didn't think they could use him, but to check with Robert Fuller, one of his *bookers;* of course, T-Bolt had just talked to Robert. T-Bolt then told Barnett that Georgia Championship didn't have any black wrestlers in a largely black wrestling city. When he accused Jim Barnett of racism, Barnett spit out these memorable words: *"I've got Andy Young in my back pocket and I've got pictures to prove it, so don't start any racial bullshit with me!"* Beau Bock's eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped - Atlanta's Andrew Young had yet to announce that he would shortly run in the election for mayor of Atlanta.

After those phone calls, we sat with Beau in his office and talked about our situation. I had been blacklisted, then, for eight years, but Beau was especially sympathetic with T-Bolt's problem. Beau sensed in T-Bolt's case,

wrestling was about the only job skill he had. Then I showed Beau the petitions I had circulated among wrestling fans when I was on the picket line and the thousands of signatures on those petitions. And I explained to Beau the NWA's *chokehold* didn't stop with our respective blacklisting. In addition to that, we had been forced out of promoting in competition with the NWA and we told Beau about what happened at the Omni Arena and elsewhere in 1974. At this point, Beau got a little excited. "You guys are being excluded from making a living in The Game, and I want to help you!" he said. "And your union - you're doing something good for sport!" Beau Bock offered use of his name and influence to help book wrestling shows and breathe some life into our wrestlers' union.

We gladly accepted Beau's offer to help us and one afternoon a week or so later, I sat in his office while he made a series of phone calls to help us book wrestling dates at various arenas in Georgia. Beau placed calls to Augusta's Bell Auditorium, the Macon Coliseum, the Columbus Auditorium, the Savannah Civic Center and the Superdome in New Orleans. On each call, Beau identified himself as an Atlanta sportscaster and said he was calling to arrange for booking a wrestling show. He then asked which dates were available. Oddly, the responses of the arena managers to Beau's inquiry were the same, as if they all were reading from the same script. On each call, he was told no dates were available. When he asked why, arena managers sounded uncomfortable, refusing to discuss it further. But when he called Atlanta's Omni Arena, he was more persistent. As a prominent local sportscaster, he was well known to Omni management and he secured a date for our IWL wrestling promotion.

With a booking date at the Omni, we proceeded to work on other promotional details, the most important of which was talent - wrestlers. Since we hadn't been promoting recently, we had no troupe of wrestlers to use. Just T-Bolt, The Sheik and me. And since both T-Bolt and I were still on the NWA's blacklist, we had to shake trees to find wrestlers who had the guts to work for an *outlaw* promotion. My old buddy Joe Scarpa (who'd been a WWF tag team champion as ChiefJay Strongbow) said he was available, since he'd just been let go by Vince McMahon who thought Joe was too fat and too old. In addition to Scarpa, we made a deal with the Poffos's independent promotion - some of their wrestlers in exchange for us coming to work for them in Lexington. So, we picked up Bob Orton, Jr.,

Pez Whatley, Ronnie Garvin and Bob Roop who were willing to work *spot* shows. One of Eddie Einhorn's wrestlers, Mighty Igor, said he was available. All these guys were good wrestlers but we wanted to book some even bigger names, some of wrestling's current stars.

We wanted to get Andre The Giant, one of the biggest draws in all of wrestling and we called his booker Vince McMahon, Sr., who turned us down with gales of laughter. We also tried to get former Jets footballer Wahoo McDaniel (Ed McDaniel), then *booking* for the NWA's Paul Boesch in Houston. Although Wahoo was still with the NWA, we thought he might work with us since he'd been recently fired by the Crocketts in Charlotte. But when T-Bolt called him, Wahoo said, "Bolt, if I come to work for you, then Barnett won't let me have any matches in Houston with the champion [Harley Race];" at the time, Jim Barnett not only controlled Georgia Championship but also booked appearances around the country of the NWA's world champion. After Wahoo turned us down, T-Bolt asked him if we could use Tony Atlas, then the hottest black wrestler in the country, and Wahoo said no. T-Bolt asked why he wouldn't cooperate with us and Wahoo said, "I've got to stay here and do the best job that I can with [NWA Houston promoter Paul] Boesch because he won't let me go and I won't be getting my money if I do."

The following week, T-Bolt flew to Jacksonville to do a *shot* for the *outlaw* promotion run by Louie Tillet and Don Curtis, and he asked two of their wrestlers to join us in Atlanta. Austin Idol (Dennis McCord) and Handsome Jimmy Valiant (Jim Fallows) had also been blacklisted by NWA promoters because they complained about their money, and they had been working with Tillet and Curtis. Both Idol and Valiant agreed to come to Atlanta to work with us and they supplied photos and videotapes for our use on TV; a few weeks later, both called to cancel because they'd suddenly been given work in the NWA. Valiant was going to North Carolina to work for the Crocketts and Idol said Barnett had just made him an offer he couldn't refuse because he needed to pay for a baby he had coming. Despite our problems in finding wrestlers who were willing to work with us, we assembled a good group of talent. We had The Sheik, ChiefJay Strongbow, The Samoans, Mighty Igor, Ivan Kalmikoff, Pez Whatley, Ron Garvin, Bob Roop, Bob Orton, Jr., Oki Shikina, Jerry Reese, The Big 0, Candy Devine, Donna Vachone, Jack Poor, Marvin Turner, The Bug, Lars Anderson and

The Great Malenko. Plus T-Bolt and myself. And they all signed contracts and joined *The Professional Wrestlers' Association,* our union; we even had membership cards printed.

By now, we had a date at the Omni and a troupe of wrestlers and we needed to get some TV time to advertise our show. But when it came to getting TV time, we once again ran headfirst into the NWA's powerful hold on TV wrestling in Georgia - the total control of access to Georgia wrestling fans exercised by the Barnett-Turner alliance. We asked Beau, who had a friend who worked for Turner Broadcasting, if he could intervene and help us get TV time on WTB S. All we wanted was a series of 30-minute blocks of time to air IWL wrestling shows where we could run videotapes of our wrestlers. When Beau called his friend, he was told no air time could be sold to our IWL - not program time and not commercial time for spots, adjacencies placed before, during or after Barnett's Georgia Championship wrestling program. Nothing, and Beau told us we'd been locked out. But it was critical that we gain access to WTBS because it was the only way to reach Georgia's wrestling marketplace, and we needed those adjacencies on WTBS that had worked so well for us in 1974. So we tried another tactic - we hired an advertising agency to buy adjacencies placed just before and after Barnett's *World Championship Wrestling* without identifying who or what would be advertised. Our order for the ads was accepted verbally over the phone, but when our ad man Leonard Allen walked into Turner offices to pay for the spots, WTBS's Rydell Moore told Allen that Ted Turner himself had instructed his sales department not to sell the spots - unless they ran at least one hour *before* and one hour *after* Barnett's *World Championship Wrestling.* By now, we had no choice and so we paid $5,000 for 19 thirty-second spots that ran for four weeks, one hour each side of Barnett's Saturday and Sunday wrestling shows.

But we still needed TV programming time to show our wrestlers in action and we had no choice but to buy TV time on a small UHF station with a relatively weak signal. Atlanta's WATL-TV on channel 36 was the only TV outlet available to us, and we bought five weeks of time for a weekly thirty-minute show - *International Wrestling League.* In wrestler interviews on our shows, we *shot* what The Business knows as *the inter-promotional angle* - a David vs. Goliath struggle between our little IWL and the dominant giant NWA, and it was all a *shoot:* we painted the NWA and

Georgia Championship as *heel*s, using their blacklisting of T-Bolt and me as injustices that required a remedy. We talked about T-Bolt's denial of a world championship title and touted T-Bolt's upcoming match with The Sheik as a *blowoff match* to correct racial injustice. In my case, we implied that the NWA and Georgia Championship were arbitrary and unfair, denying my promised championship match. Just after our shows aired, Barnett's predatory rough stuff began again: first, he tried to negotiate an exclusive agreement with WATL-TV to buy us off the air; when they turned him down, Barnett suddenly changed his traditional time slot for his WTBS wrestling show, a time slot with a ten year history. When he changed the broadcast schedule for his *World Championship Wrestling*, it ran head-to-head with our *International Wrestling League* show on WATL. More of Barnett's *shooting* was on the way: a few weeks later, he had his lawyer Tench Coxe of Troutman Sanders (who also represented Turner Broadcasting's WTBS) threaten us and WATL- TV with lawsuits for using our wrestler interviews to *defame* the NWA and Georgia Championship. The threatened legal action showed how desperate Barnett had become - he was obviously watching our WATL show, but looked a little silly when he told his attorney to take legal action over some of our wrestlers' *shoot* interviews that contained words like "blackball" and "NWA" and "Georgia Championship" in the same sentence. After the threatened lawsuits, we told our wrestlers to tone down their *shoot* commentary and not *talk dirty* by using words like "NWA" and "Georgia Championship;" instead, they should just say *"the other organization"* As always, Jim Barnett provided for lots of laughs, although the consequences of his behavior were deadly serious.

To round out our promotional strategy, we arranged for radio advertising and had several thousand leaflets printed for distribution outside Barnett's wrestling shows in Atlanta. The radio ads proceeded without difficulty, but four young boys we hired to hand out leaflets at the NWA's Omni show instead tossed them onto the railroad tracks that run underneath the arena; afterward, our printer said the kids were paid to ditch the leaflets. Finally, we ran into a problem with the Omni Arena, which had agreed to carry an announcement of our upcoming wrestling show on its electronic billboard. According to our Omni contract, its billboard was obligated to show an announcement of our event for several weeks leading up to the show, and when the promised notice didn't appear, we complained. The

Omni acknowledged its “oversight” and corrected the billboard - *two* days before our wrestling show.

It was clear enough that Jim Barnett was fighting fiercely to nip our International Wrestling League in the bud before it became something to be reckoned with. We knew he would, and we expected to be targets of the usual arsenal of dirty tricks and backroom deals with arena managers and TV stations. And it didn’t really surprise us when he changed his TV time on WTBS or when he ordered his and Ted Turner’s lawyer to go after our *shoot* TV interviews or even when those kids were paid to ditch our leaflets. But we didn’t expect Barnett to risk his own standing in the NWA, or public confidence in the NWA, by gambling with his last, ultimate resort: as *booker* for the NWA’s world champion, *Barnett suddenly ordered three world strap changes in that spring of 1981, all of them in Georgia!* In rapid succession, Harley Race dropped the world title to Tommy “Wildfire” Rich in April at Augusta, *Georgia;* Harley regained it seven days later in Gainesville, *Georgia* of all places - where a sellout brings only 1,000 tickets; and in June, Harley dropped the *strap* to Dusty Rhodes on an *Atlanta* show. Inside The Business, this got everybody’s attention: *never in the NWA’s world heavyweight championship genealogy had the belt changed so many times over the course of three months in one territory!* Even Georgia sports reporters noticed the odd development in an odd industry, as when Georgia sportscaster Mark Haggard of WTVM-TV in Columbus editorialized on the air that the *strap* switch “was obviously a setup to hype all the [NWA] matches in Georgia for a week.”

But inside The Business, one of these *strap* changes attracted a lot more attention than the others - the unexpected decision to give the NWA’s world *strap* to Tommy Rich, who at 23 was just beginning to develop a teenybopper heart-throb following. Putting the world title on Tommy was too curious to be understood without a cynical interpretation, and wrestlers throughout the nation grumbled quietly among themselves that Barnett must have taken a liking to young, blonde Tommy Rich. Around the country, other wrestlers filled in the blanks and connected some dots, which is what Roy Shire was talking about when he testified under oath, as discussed earlier.

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Despite Jim Barnett's promotional hardball, we were confident we had a good wrestling show lined up for the Omni, good enough to attract attention and sell tickets. And we got some late help from the *Atlanta Journal* a few days before our Omni event when it ran the headline WILSON, PATTERSON RETURN TO GEORGIA MAT SUNDAY. The article noted the two of us had been *inactive* in Georgia wrestling for seven years and had been headliners in Atlanta until we *ran into disagreements* with Georgia Championship Wrestling, and it mentioned my pending lawsuit against the NWA and Georgia Championship and that the two of us had formed a pro wrestlers' association, patterned after player associations elsewhere. The long article quoted T-Bolt at length: "We're not looking just for something for ourselves because wrestlers have no benefits other than what they are paid for matches. We want to work out hospitalization, retirement, disability and things like that. There are guys all over the country who would like to wrestle for us because they aren't getting those benefits anywhere else. If we can get it going here this time, we have a chance to accomplish a lot of things," he told *Journal* reporter Darrell Simmons. But T-Bolt didn't tell Simmons everything - he didn't say anything about the scripts we'd designed for that night with several *angles left open* to bring the fans back for another show and another. And he didn't say anything about where we went in downtown Atlanta to rent a snake for The Sheik, or that we'd told him to bring his own razor blades and flash paper.

Later that week at the Omni, Thunderbolt Patterson became the *"world's first black wrestling champion*," defeating The Sheik with his snake and a blinding fireball in a short match, as usual; technically, T- Bolt wasn't really the first *black* world champion and The Sheik's title was not actually "World" but instead, "United States" - nonetheless, it was close enough, especially in pro wrestling. Earlier that same night, I became *one-half* a world champion when my old and now feathered friend with a big nose tag partner Chief Strongbow (Joe Scarpa) agreed to let me finish our world championship match with the hated Samoans by spinning one of them into the ropes and clamping on a sleeper hold.

Of course, we'd told both The Sheik and the Samoans to make T-Bolt and me look good and they did, but our championships were hollow because the

show was a bust with a crowd of only 4,400 and a $14,265 gross gate. A crowd of 4,000 is often acceptable, but not in the Omni which seats 16,000 for a wrestling show. Our upfront costs were about $25,000 and we lost $15,000. All in all, it was another financial disaster attached to theatrical success.

After the show, T-Bolt, my brother-in-law Mel and I joined The Sheik in his hotel room to drain our sorrow in drink. The four of us wallowed in the unpleasant details that explained our failure to attract a bigger crowd, and we concluded that what had killed us was our inability to advertise and promote our brand of wrestling to Georgia's *wrestling audience.* And that audience was owned and controlled by Ted Turner with access rights granted only by Jim Barnett - it was that simple and yet that complicated as a nut to crack (about a year later, Ted Turner's WTBS wrestling show reached its highest rating ever - 6.8 and 22% of the *national* cable audience). During all this soul- searching and blame laying, The Sheik just sat there, nursing his drink and listening to the rest of us. He was in an especially nasty mood: he'd dropped his championship *strap* to T-Bolt but hadn't been paid his eight percent, even though we rented his snake. As we talked about the problems in the wrestling business, the topic turned to Jim Barnett and his reign of predatory terror around the country. Suddenly, The Sheik decided to talk: "You know why Detroit's going down?" The Sheik growled. 'Because Barnett stabbed me in the back. Barnett. The guy I bought it from. I used to book my wrestlers from him. I'd pay the fee and put them on the show and you know what happened? They *killed* my business - promising your fans big names and the big names never show. Thank Barnett for that! I bought the territory from Barnett and then he turned around and screwed The Business so he could steal The Business back later on. About three or four years ago, Barnett called me down here to Atlanta to his penthouse. He offered to save Detroit for me because my business was bad. I told him *why* my business was bad - [because] he *substituted me to death!* And Crockett flew into Troy [Michigan] and sat in the airport [with me] and tried to buy my business from me. And Bill Watts tried to buy it from me.

Another guy, Fuller, tried to buy the thing from me one time," The Sheik grumbled.

After The Sheik's revelations, I talked openly for the first time about Barnett's penthouse invitation in Australia, tracing the history of my difficulties in the NWA to that evening in Sydney when I refused a date with one of wrestling's powerful figures. The Sheik just looked at me with his dark, piercing eyes, acting unsurprised. Nodding his scarred and pulpy forehead from side to side, he talked softly about a party he had attended at Barnett's Colony Square condo several months earlier. "I was looking for the bathroom and I opened the wrong door. It was a bedroom, and Barnett was in there with that blonde kid who was given the world *strap* last April in Augusta."

"There ain't no nice guys in this business," The Sheik whispered. "There ain't no people - there's dollars!"

A few weeks later, T-Bolt and I flew to Lexington to work some matches for the Poffos' *outlaw* promotion, as part of the exchange that brought Bob Roop, Ronnie Garvin, Pez Whatley and Bob Orton to our Omni card. The Poffos picked us up at the airport in a Volkswagen van they used to haul wrestlers from town to town. We drove to a four-room house in Lexington, their promotion's headquarters. It was an interesting operation: every member of the family had a job - Angelo ran the thing, and his wife answered the phones and handled clerical work; Lanny did oddjobs and Randy supervised a makeshift gym in one of the bedrooms. That night, about ten of us crammed into the van for the trip to a highschool gym, where the Poffos staged most of their shows. I'd heard other wrestlers complain about the Poffo's traveling arrangements - that old van stuffed with wrestlers and their gear, all to make the trip on one tank of gas. When we got to the gym, we learned they planned to tape the matches for their TV show. I got my instructions for a match with a local *gebroney* and went out and got it over with.

By the time I got back to the dressing room, T-Bolt was arguing with Bob Orton about their match, which was on next. Orton was telling T-Bolt, "Over the years, I have *put you over* a lot of times, and I want you to *put me over* tonight." T-Bolt acted surprised, since he'd been planning to start

wrestling for the Poffos on a regular basis. He told Orton, “When you come into a territory to stay, they don’t beat you right away on television!” When Orton insisted T-Bolt *do a job* for him, T-Bolt ran out of the locker room to find Angelo and Randy and ask them what the deal was with his losing. But the Poffos didn’t know about Orton’s demand, and they concluded Orton was getting ready to leave for an NWA territory with videotape of T-Bolt losing in his pocket. There weren’t many promoters who had video of T-Bolt losing, and he wanted to keep it that way. T-Bolt refused to wrestle that night, and we drove back to Atlanta. On the way home, I asked T-Bolt about why he thought Orton made such a fuss about losing to him, and he shared his suspicion: that Orton intended to use the tape of T-bolt’s losing to ingratiate himself with NWA promoters and get back into wrestling’s mainstream. “Why else would they do it? I just been champion for three weeks!” he said. A few days later, Bob Orton left the Poffos’ *outlaw* promotion to work for Bill Watts’ NWA promotion in Louisiana.

Five months later, NWA members met at the Las Vegas Sahara Hotel for their annual celebration of monopoly power. By now, Barnett’s and Ted Turner’s attorney Tench Coxe was attending NWA meetings, trying to help the crusty collection of wrestling promoters stay out of more legal trouble. Coxe’s influence on the NWA’s official record of its proceedings was beginning to show. His first step in mopping up NWA legal difficulties was taken in 1979 when he told its members to abolish their grievance committee, a subgroup that handled the messy business of territorial disputes and members who cooperated with competing promoters - *opposition.* To further hide the real purpose of this committee, Coxe renamed it Litigation and Disputes Committee, although there was no change in the members’ inclination to continue their blacklisting and boycotting. Which is what happened on October 12, 1981: the NWA proceeded formally with its ritual of dismemberment: Eddie “The Sheik” Farhat was unanimously blacklisted by 22 of his closest friends into promotional purgatory.

For the first time in at least ten years, the recorded minutes of that NWA annual meeting were not written by Jim Barnett, whose breezy style but legal naivete led to unwise memorializing. With all the lawsuits pending, NWA minutes and correspondence were making their way into the sunshine as documentary evidence of NWA misbehavior. To stop the hemorrhaging of NWA secrets, Coxe drafted the NWA's 1981 minutes so the proceedings could be sanitized, and he did a good job ofit. He wrote: "It was pointed out that Eddie Farhat of Farhat Enterprises, Inc. had participated in a match in Atlanta sponsored by a group called the International Wrestling Alliance [sic], which was publicized as a match for the World Heavyweight Championship, that the President upon being informed that this match was being publicized instructed Farhat that as the controlling stockholder of an enterprise which is a member of the NWA, he was prohibited by the NWA By-Laws from recognizing any world heavyweight champion other than the NWA championship and asked him not to take part in the match but that despite the warning proceeded to do so. After discussion it was unanimously moved, seconded and resolved that Farhat Enterprises, Inc. and Eddie Farhat be suspended for one year from NWA membership because of failure to observe NWA by-laws. It was further resolved that Eddie Farhat be asked to explain his action at the next NWA annual meeting or some other suitable occasion, after which the membership should take such further action as might be appropriate"

Two and half months later, The Sheik was called to testify as a witness in connection with the Poffo's antitrust suit, and he spoke his mind: "For the benefit of the Court, what is the NWA, Mr. Farhat?" "It's a group of men that control the wrestling business," The Sheik replied. When he was asked to elaborate, The Sheik testified: "Well there's I don't know how many members . . . now, about 24, maybe 25, and they have areas around the world and the country that they own themselves, like in Atlanta, Georgia, Jim Barnett has Georgia and Florida. He has investments into those places . . . So like I claim I own Detroit, and Michigan and part of Canada and Ohio

because I bought it, you know, from one of the members [Jim Barnett in 1965].”

When The Sheik was asked how he got talent for his wrestling shows, he said, “I used to call up the promoters and ask them to send me guys that I thought were doing good . . . I went to *the man, Jim Barnett”*

The Sheik was asked if NWA members cooperated with each other in exchanging wrestling talent, and he replied: “Yeah, you can do it. As long as you’re a member, you can exchange talent with anybody you wanted to, if he was available and you were on the *good list’”* “What’s the *good list?”* The Sheik was asked. “Well, as long as you weren’t causing any trouble. I’m just saying what I think I know about it. They’re still some members who are the leaders of this whole thing. You know, if they didn’t like what you were doing, they just - you wouldn’t be around to do your promoting. So in the beginning I was very well liked, but at the end, this last three or four years, they just kept giving me talent and not showing - they wouldn’t show up. They say they’ give them to you, but they never would show up,” The Sheik replied.

The Sheik also was asked why he was no longer a member of the NWA, and he answered this way: “I wrestled in Atlanta, Georgia, and one of the members claims he owns the city. So I went there to wrestle, and since that day I have been on their *bad list’”*

When asked if professional wrestlers are independent contractors, The Sheik said: “Yeah . . . but they can’t go nowhere without Jim Crockett and Barnett getting them booked and telling them where to go. They got to go where they tell them to go. If they don’t go, they ain’t goin’ to be working nowhere. . . . they have to do what the promoter tells him.”’

“So essentially, even if the minutes and bylaws of the NWA say that they’re not doing this, it is your testimony that in fact they do this?” The Sheik was asked.

“Sure they do,” The Sheik testified.

One by one, NWA lawyers concluded each of the lawsuits against it in the 1970s, avoiding the embarrassing publicity that courtroom trials would certainly bring. Although the NWA paid stiff legal fees to Troutman Sanders for its capacity to run up the tab for all who dared sue The Business (with the proverbial defense attorneys' delay tactics and unnecessarily tortured depositions), to say nothing of the cash settlements negotiated, each of these *shooting* matches was ultimately settled out of court - privately, and sometimes confidentially.

After three and a half years, Ann Gunkel finally settled her lawsuit when Georgia Championship Wrestling agreed to a consent judgment in June 1980. In settling, Georgia Championship paid Ann about $200,000 while "denying and disclaiming liability of any kind." Later, her attorney James H. Coil III said, "We were successful because we were one of the few to take it [an antitrust case against the NWA] all the way. We worked hard on this case for two years and the work was substantial. Our own investigation of the NWA was better than the Justice Department's. I had thought wrestling was a real low class thing, and I was surprised to learn about how much money was involved. We learned Ray Gunkel was making $300,000 to $400,000 a year in 1970, and running around with Hollywood types. But I met a lot of wrestlers who are decent people with moral convictions."

The Poffo family's lawsuit was dismissed in 1982 when the Poffos' evidence suddenly dried up. After several months, the Poffos' witnesses mysteriously disappeared, including Bob Roop and Ronnie Garvin who recanted their prior testimony given in depositions (cited extensively in this book) for the Poffo lawsuit. For those familiar with NWA tactics, it was no surprise when Poffo's witnesses later found work with various NWA promotions. Nonetheless, Poffo attorney Brian P. Gilfedder said later, "I still don't really understand it. We encountered difficulty in developing our proof after nine or ten witnesses backed out. They would talk to me in private, but balked at going on the record. When our witnesses fled, we were left without a case."

My lawsuit was unexpectedly settled out of court in 1985 on the very day it was scheduled to go to trial. The end of my case came quickly when former NWA member and northern California promoter Roy Shire agreed to testify about my blacklisting. When Shire arrived in Atlanta ready to take

the witness stand in court, NWA attorneys pursued a settlement energetically, going well beyond previous monetary offers. It was clear the NWA was worried about a scandalous public airing of Barnett's business practices and whatever else might come into the open. Although my attorney Nick Lotito advised me not to accept the settlement offer, I felt trapped between forces that pulled in different directions. Continuing with the case involved an important uncertainty: even if I were to win a million dollar jury verdict, the award might be minuscule because of the Georgia promotion's depleted resources. In its final years, Georgia Championship Wrestling was not paying dividends to its stockholders because of Barnett's spending, much of it on Sanders and Coxe who submitted hefty legal bills. It also was unclear that Barnett now had sufficient personal assets that could be attached to any jury award. But furthermore, Georgia Championship Wrestling was sold in 1985 to Vince and Linda McMahon, and if I won my case, they would certainly appeal the verdict. That would bring additional costs just to answer the appeal, and I couldn't underwrite that expensive exercise.

Although my attorney Nick Lotito was convinced we could prevail at trial and thought Georgia Championship's settlement offer was insufficient, he didn't have to look into the eyes of two of my children, Josh and Suzanne, who were now ready to go to college but needed money to do so. So, I settled for less than $100,000. One of the settlement's conditions was my silence on its amount, but I vowed privately that I would resume my fight for wrestling's reform on another day in another place.

Chapter 9

P O L I T I C A L S L E E P E R H O L D S

THAT FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPH of a grinning Jimmy Carter clamping a headlock on a masked wrestler (my first wrestling teacher, Johnny Walker in costume) tells a lot about the relationship between politics and pro wrestling. For one thing, there is a natural kinship between the two - both are fixed, evil often wins and money determines the outcome, as one newspaper columnist put it. More importantly, this old photo suggests how the relationship between politics and wrestling was mutually exploitive - local and national politicians benefitted from promoters' campaign contributions and offers of free political advertising on TV wrestling and at arena shows in exchange for pols' helping the promoters control state regulation, legislative investigations and the composition of state athletic commissions. In retrospect, the famous picture told it all, which is why it was often used by both wrestling promoters and the Jimmy Carter political campaign.

But the real wrestling fans in the Carter clan were the President's mother Miz Lillian and brother Billy. It was Miz Lillian who invited Johnny Walker to visit her at the Carter homestead in Plains, Georgia, and didn't ask Johnny to take off his *sock.* Later, Miz Lillian arranged for Johnny to attend Jimmy Carter's inauguration in Washington, D.C., but the Secret Service disinvited him when Johnny said he intended to wear his mask. That wasn't the extent of the Carter connection with wrestling. In 1980, President Carter named Atlanta wrestling promoter James E. Barnett to membership on the National Council on the Arts. Beltway pundits wondered, who was this guy Barnett? Looking for another Georgia *political mafia* connection, *The Washington Post* explained Barnett's appointment by noting his campaign contributions to not only Carter but also Georgia Representative Wyche Fowler, Georgia Governor George Busbee and Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson and quoted Barnett as saying, "I'm sure this isn't a political nomination." Of course, Barnett's acquaintances in wrestling had often heard his claim that he only dealt "with kings, prime ministers and dictators."

By the time Carter's presidential term ended in 1981, I was well aware of how effectively wrestling's powerbrokers cultivated politicians at all levels. Barnett not only bragged about having Atlanta mayor Andy Young "in his hip pocket with pictures to prove it" but he had another photograph he showed to persons he wanted to dazzle, one of whom was wrestler Bob Roop. And Roop was so impressed he testified about it in the Poffos' antitrust suit against the NWA in 1980.

"Barnett had a lot of political power. I say *political* power. Jim Barnett, himself, told me how friendly he is with the national senators from Kentucky. He took a great deal of pride in showing me - when Dick Nixon got elected in 1972, Jim Barnett went to the inauguration and he took a great deal of delight in showing me the picture that, in the reviewing stand behind Nixon while Nixon was making his inaugural speech, Jim Barnett was sitting in the fourth row and there was about four or five more rows behind that, and then the joint chiefs of staff and John Wayne and Bob Hope all had to stand up, but he got to sit down," Bob said.

Professional wrestling's history of political corruption is legendary, which is why all the wrestlers I knew took a dim view of state athletic commissions. I learned much more about the politics of wrestling after I got access to Justice Department files which showed at least the tip of this old iceberg: the California Athletic Commission was controlled by wrestling promoter Cal Eaton in the mid-1950s; Fred Kohler was

"helped" by the Illinois Athletic Commission in 1953, according to Sam Muchnick; Virginia's Athletic Commission was accused of collusion with wrestling promoters in 1959; Maryland's Athletic Commission was allegedly controlled by Toots Mondt and Vince McMahon, Sr. the same year; Kentucky's Athletic Commission was paid $3,500 a year in the 1960s for its cooperation with Nick Gulas and Roy Welch, who made similar arrangements in Tennessee and Alabama; Louisiana's Athletic Commission was controlled by LeRoy McGuirk in 1962; Indiana's Athletic Commissioner was given the proceeds of one large wrestling show each year by promoters Dick "The Bruiser" Afflis and Wilbur Snyder in the late

1960s, and the Portland Oregon Athletic Commission was controlled by promoter Don Owen. When Ann Gunkel was refused a promoter's license in New York, a state athletic commissioner told her Vince McMahon was a good friend. And those are just the ones we know about from legal proceedings. As Eddie Einhorn said of his experiences in wrestling promotion in New York and elsewhere, "Some athletic commissions are more independent than others, but most of them ain't."

The attorney who represented Don Pruitt in one of the wrestling lawsuits put it this way: "It's just the way things operate in state government with pals and influence. It was simple favoritism. *Payoffs.* Just a group of people who could get done whatever they wanted to do. If you weren't one of the boys, you would find your license hanging by a thread. And any little violation was grounds for suspension. They had the commissions in their pocket. And in many cases, they had a hand in who was appointed. Because that's who they worked with. You just made some key campaign contributions. I was told that we didn't have to worry about organized crime. That *these wrestling guys were so tough that organized crime was afraid of them,*" said William T. Warner.

Pro wrestling's political clout stems partly from the history of how athletic commissions emerged in this country during the 1920s. Their appearance followed the state-by-state legalization of boxing, and the initial rationale for state regulatory authority was to protect boxers, not to produce tax revenue. When pro wrestling was swept up with boxing, the wrestling industry learned that athletic commission sanctioning could be used as currency in its uphill struggle with legitimacy. As often happens with governmental intervention, what began as regulation ended up as protection. But the political character of athletic commissions was created when states treated commission positions as appointed patronage jobs - political appointees. In years afterward, state athletic commissions worked hand in hand with the boxing and wrestling industries, and while commissions tried to regulate boxing, wrestling paid the freight for their existence. Knowing this, wrestling promoters exercised their power by influencing appointments of commissioners as well as the regulatory zeal of those appointed.

So far as wrestling was concerned, state athletic commissions became essentially what The Business wanted them to be: a convenient source of

legitimacy and a compliant partner in wrestling's need to do its business without much official scrutiny or interference. What began as governmental intervention justified by benevolent state interest ultimately was transformed into a toothless, ritualistic exercise whose principal purposes were facilitating cronyism and collecting enough revenue to pay for its otherwise meaningless existence. And it didn't take long for athletic commissions in many (or most) states to be corrupted by The Business, which wasn't so surprising.

At the same time, I thought - and still do - that state athletic commissions were a good idea, at least in principle. My own experience, and what I knew about the experiences of other wrestlers, convinced me that properly operated athletic commissions could prevent wrestler deaths with medical exams and insure fair treatment of wrestlers by monitoring the business practices of wrestling promoters.

When I finally realized how effectively wrestling promoters had politicized the industry, I concluded that any attempt to clean up The Business would have to get just as political by courting and supporting the same government officials already seduced by the wrestling promoters. I figured it was past time to make wrestling's political playing field level.

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About a year after The Business *killed* our independent Georgia promotion, I wrote a letter to President Ronald Reagan at the White House. I had met Reagan 12 years earlier when he was California Governor and I was a Los Angeles Ram, and I reminded Reagan of the occasion when he had walked into the Rams' training camp to see George Allen. My brief encounter with Reagan on that day involved a short conversation when he strolled into the weight room where I was working out and we had talked for 15 to 20 minutes about his background in sports announcing. As we finished our conversation, Reagan said, "Well, Jim, if there's any way I can ever be of help, please get in touch with me."

Now, years later, I intended to ask for the help that he offered, and I thought that in light of Reagan's earlier involvement as union president of

the Screen Actors Guild and his knowledge of Hollywood blacklisting in the 1950s, he might be interested in the problems of a couple of blacklisted wrestlers.

My letter to President Reagan said: “We have been trying to create a union for professional wrestlers in this country as well as free competition in the marketplace with a new wrestling league that embraces the qualities and ideals of America - better pay and benefits for the wrestlers, none of which exist and never have. Because we took these steps, we have been personally blackballed and our company that promoted matches was forced out of business. We have experienced living hell on earth, financial devastation and have lost credibility in the community.” Reagan’s response on White House stationery arrived ten months later, and I ripped open the envelope in eager receipt of Presidential intervention. My initial excitement turned to anger when I read the bland message of appeasement typed on letterhead from the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports: “Your comments have been read with interest, and I know that President Reagan would join me in hoping that you are able to resolve your professional problems. It would not be appropriate for the President to attempt to initiate a Congressional hearing or to intervene in a matter that has been addressed by the courts.”

A few months later, Reagan’s Justice Department filed a Friend of the Court brief on behalf of Coach Vince Dooley and Coach Barry Switzer supporting their attempt to stop the TV monopoly on NCAA football broadcasts. Impressed with the highly placed compassion for my old coach at Georgia, I thought if Reagan’s Justice Department could help Vince Dooley, it could also help his first consensus All-American. When I returned to the Justice Department’s Atlanta office and made my argument, I was told to talk with another Justice attorney, Karen Lautz. She listened sympathetically as I recited my problems for the fourth time to a third Justice Department attorney. I said, “If you can’t do anything else, can’t you please do for me what you’ve done for Coach Dooley and Coach Switzer? You did it for my old coach, please do the same thing for me.” Lautz said, “Jim, we’re doing a cursory investigation and we recommend that Washington do a major investigation.” It was enough to sustain my hope that the Justice Department was about ready to move against The Business.

At about this time, I got involved with the 1982 Georgia gubernatorial election. When Bo Ginn, a ten-year congressman from the coastal fourth district, announced his candidacy for governor, I volunteered to work in his campaign. I had no important objection to his opponent Joe Frank Harris, but Bo was the only politician I had contacted who seemed interested in my allegations about The Business. Unlike other politicians I wrote to, he asked the Attorney General to review my complaint about the NWA's antitrust violations and he kept me posted on the Justice Department's responses. He had tried to help, and I thought this was a good time to reciprocate and to counter Georgia Championship Wrestling's clout with wrestler grass roots activism. So T-Bolt and I joined Bo's other celebrity supporters, Hank Aaron and Fran Tarkenton, for campaign appearances. We worked from dawn to dusk for several weeks in Atlanta areas where wrestling fans lived, and we drew large crowds. When Bo lost the election to (later governor) Joe Frank Harris but carried Atlanta, we told him he should have turned us loose in Georgia's other wrestling towns.

A year later, I tried another political tack when I joined forces with Georgia's civil rights movement. T-Bolt was already active as a volunteer with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Martin Luther King Center For Nonviolent Social Change and various black churches. We also worked for Andy Young's mayoral campaign in 1981, a commitment inspired by Jim Barnett's assertion that "I've got Andy in my back pocket, so don't start any racial bullshit with me." When it was announced by Coretta Scott King and Rev. Joe Lowery and Rev. Quincey Carswell that an alliance of the King Center, SCLC and Operation PUSH would undertake a fund-raising drive to sponsor a 20th anniversary march to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington - a commemoration of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963 - T-Bolt said he wanted to participate, and asked my advice about what we could do. I suggested a new twist to what he'd already been doing to advance it: why not bring the fund-raising program together with our own human and civil rights movement for wrestlers? There were thousands of Thunderbolt Patterson and Big Jim

fans in Atlanta's public housing projects, and I proposed we promote a series of benefit wrestling shows in which the civil rights alliance would derive revenue in exchange for helping us with advertising and promotion of our wrestling shows. I saw this novel approach as a stopgap tactic to get around Ted Turner's control of the TV wrestling marketplace - it would be a civil rights and wrestling joint venture that wouldn't need Turner's cooperation or his superstation.

We presented the proposal to civil rights leader Joe Lowery, and offered Lowery's fund-raising program 35% of the gates plus concession revenue in exchange for their support, and both Lowery and Carswell said they were interested, as was SCLC and PUSH. We also enlisted the help of Atlanta's City Wide Tenants' Association, the city's bureaucratic body that linked together Atlanta's 27 public housing projects. We proposed that each public housing project's president and building captain canvas project residents, explaining the arrangement and selling tickets at $5 each, and they agreed. After we made arrangements to stage an outdoor wrestling show at Atlanta's Morris Brown College football stadium, we looked around for talent. We lined up a bunch of non-NWA wrestlers, all *outlaws* in the view of the NWA - The Sheik and Bruiser Brody (Frank Goodish), Otis Sistrunk, Eddie Mansfield, Bill Dromo, The Mongol, General Horner, the Gladiators, the Infernos, Zatar, Homer O'Dell, the Assassin and Super D. We named the show *The Summer Wrestling Spectacular of1983* and were confident we could get at least 20% of Atlanta's 50,000 public housing tenants to support it, especially after the local AFL-CIO endorsed it. We also lobbied Atlanta mayor Andy Young for his support, and he cooperated by issuing a mayoral declaration *"in recognition of all people involved in this benefit for the March on Washington,, I proclaim Saturday, August 6, 1983, in our City as SUMMER WRESTLING SPECTACULAR DAY*r.*"* With the support of Atlanta's mayor and the city's energetic civil rights leadership, both T-Bolt and I felt we finally had a sure-fire winner.

What happened next - or didn't happen - is difficult to explain: first, Frank Goodish called from Dallas to say he was sorry but would have to be a no-show on instructions from the NWA's Dallas promoter Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson); Frank said he was worried about his wrestling career if he didn't go along with Fritz and Eddie Graham and Jim Barnett, and I thanked Frank for calling ahead of time. But then, the day before our show, I learned

not one ticket had been sold in the entire population of 50,000 project tenants. Not a single ticket, despite the endorsement of Coretta King, Lowery, Carswell, PUSH, SCLC, the Tenants' Association, the local AFL-CIO and Mayor Andy Young. Finally, we canceled the show when an afternoon electrical storm provided us with a convenient way out.

What happened? When we had talked with civil rights leader Joe Lowery weeks earlier, we warned him about the political problems in wrestling promotion and recited our prior experiences in Georgia. At the time, I told Lowery about Jim Barnett's generous contributions to Andy Young's political campaign, and warned Lowery about the *politics of wrestling* in Georgia. Lowery had listened politely and assured us he was *"unbought and unbossea.* Lowery also had said if the NWA wouldn't deal with us, he'd make the issue a top priority on the civil rights agenda and organize a national breadbasket program - a combination of boycotts, strikes and pickets - aimed at the National Wrestling Alliance. This was about four years before Jesse Jackson would threaten a similar action against professional baseball. But in the days after our canceled 1983 *Summer Wrestling Spectacular* civil rights benefit show, none of the civil rights or labor union people connected with the event was talking and Louise Whatley, then president of Atlanta's Tenants Association, was strangely unavailable during the week of the show and afterward. A black minister, Rev. James Orange, was supposed to have collected and held the money with the help of a local AFL-CIO organizer, but they weren't around, either. Among building captains, no one knew anything. In fact, we never did find an explanation for why no tickets had been sold, but we didn't really need one. We *knew* what happened, and at that point, T-Bolt and I lost confidence in the celebrated civil rights spokesmen in Georgia. We had even asked Jesse Jackson to take an interest in our cause, when T-Bolt personally delivered our letter to Jesse, asking for his help. We're still wating to hear from Jesse Jackson, too. Ultimately, Thunderbolt Patterson and I walked away from wrestling promotion, embittered and resigned.

At about this time, another wrestling turf war erupted in northern California. One of the combatants was the gravelly voiced old NWA troublemaker from the 1950s - Antone “Ripper” Leone, blacklisted 26 years earlier. Barred from wrestling in the 1950s, Ripper was unable to make a living in The Business ever since. Forced out of wrestling, he moved his family to California where he started a carpet-cleaning business. With the same clever wit that made him an entertaining wrestler (“the greatest showman,” said his old friend Tiger Joe Marsh in 1989), Ripper became a successful businessman. In the late 1970s, he sold his 45-store chain of carpet cleaning and sales operations, and bought a 16-store pizza franchise. By now, Ripper was a multimillionaire. Forced to make a living outside The Game, he nonetheless dreamed about returning to it.

In early 1980, Ripper learned that both the NWA’s Roy Shire and Louie Miller, who jointly *owned* northern California, were contemplating retirement. Ripper called Miller, asking if it was true. Miller confirmed the rumor, and invited Ripper to buy his territory that included Oakland and some other cities for $35,000. Knowing about the NWA’s traditional territorial allocations, Ripper assumed he was purchasing an exclusive wrestling franchise for that territory. Ripper realized territorial allocations were illegal, and he could have simply begun his promotion without dealing with Miller, but Ripper wanted to follow usual wrestling business procedures. At the time, the NWA’s northern California territory was nearly dead and there was no longer an intact circuit of wrestlers. To locate talent, Leone called NWA bookers around the country. Although Vince McMahon, Sr. wouldn’t help, the Indianapolis booking office headed by Dick The Bruiser and Wilbur Snyder agreed to supply both wrestlers and TV tapes, and Ripper began rebuilding the northern California regional promotion. Determined to succeed, Ripper spent a few hundred thousand dollars to get TV time and paid top money to wrestlers to work for him. It wasn’t long before Ripper’s wrestlers spread the word about the generous treatment accorded them by Antone Leone in northern California. Although his shows didn’t draw well, Ripper paid his wrestlers $800 a week, plus expenses. None of Ripper’s wrestlers had ever made that kind of money before, and the Indianapolis- based wrestlers told Ripper they were eager to be booked in California. Then, without explanation, the Indianapolis office cut off Ripper’s supply of wrestlers and TV tapes.

Ripper complained to the California Athletic Commission, arguing that since he purchased a territorial wrestling franchise, he should be allowed to operate it without interference. The Athletic Commission told him there was nothing it could do about his problems. When the California Commission wouldn't help, Ripper went to the Justice Department with an affidavit submitted by Sam (Frank) Menacker, former wrestler and El Paso promoter who had cooperated with the Justice Department's 1955 investigation about 45 years earlier. More recently, Menacker had worked for Bruiser and Snyder as their TV announcer and in the front office of the Indianapolis promotion for 12 years and he had witnessed the key incidents in the conspiracy to *kill* Antone Leone's California promotion. Menacker told the Justice Department that when Verne Gagne and Vince McMahon, Sr. decided to promote wrestling in Oakland, "they wanted to eliminate Antone from the wrestling picture in California . . . they all banded together to destroy Antone Leone. *Politics does indeed make for strange bedfellows!* I was present many times in Bruiser's office when he would receive a call from Snyder who had received a call from Gagne who had talked with McMahon. The calls were always about Antone Leone, and although I heard only one side of the conversations, it was evident to me just what was going on. Just as Antone had started to get good wrestlers established, the rug was pulled out from under him and it was a disastrous financial setback for him. No other wrestling offices would send him tapes or wrestlers," said Menacker.

Menacker gave the Justice Department details: "At tremendous expense, Antone made arrangements with Channel 20 in Sacramento and Channel 31 in San Francisco to produce and run his tapes. But Channel 20 had been purchased by KPLR-TV in St. Louis, where Muchnick's show was shown. Muchnick induced KPLR-TV to discontinue Antone's shows in Sacramento. Verne Gagne moved into San Francisco and . . . outbid Antone Leone for the San Francisco TV. Meanwhile, in Bruiser's organization, the wrestlers who had worked for Antone, who were delighted with their pay and treatment they had received, constantly asked Dick [The Bruiser] to book them in Antone's territory again. Not only did Dick [The Bruiser] refuse, he threatened to keep them from working for any booking office in the country if they went in for Antone. I was present on at least two occasions when [Bruiser's son-in-law] Spike Huber, who scored a big hit for Antone, practically pleaded with Dick to let him go work for Antone,

but Dick was adamant in his refusal," Menacker testified. Menacker added: "The monopolistic and unfair practices originally started by the NWA and later adopted by the AWA and WWF, and outlawed by the U.S. Justice Department in 1956, still do exist. I know that all the wrestlers who worked for Antone feel as I do. We want to see justice triumph."

A few months later, Ripper received a phone call from Karen Lautz of the Justice Department's Atlanta office. "She called about reopening the investigation of the NWA, and she talked of another problem about *a football player"* Ripper said. But nothing came of the call. Later, she called again and said they didn't want to pursue it." By now, Ripper had lost more than $500,000 trying to promote wrestling in California. As a last resort, Ripper tried to cash in some chips from his many years of Republican campaign contributions - because Ripper knew all about *the politics of wrestling,* too. When George Deukmejian was elected California governor, Ripper made his move. "I'd been a contributor to the god-damned Republicans for many years, so when they returned to power, I thought I'd help them by offering to be appointed to the California Athletic Commission. They didn't know what the hell was going on - didn't have anyone who understood the wrestling business," Antone said. Ripper waited patiently for his appointment to the California State Athletic Commission. It didn't happen and he finally closed down his attempt to compete with the mat monopoly.

Back in Georgia at about this time, I was helping my old friend Thunderbolt Patterson with his own lawsuit against the NWA and promoters Eddie Graham, Jim Barnett and Jim Crockett, Sr. He wanted to include Turner Broadcasting's WTBS-TV as another defendant but couldn't find an attorney in Atlanta who was willing to sue Ted Turner. The powerful presence of Captain Outrageous in the *politics of wrestling* not only controlled access to the TV wrestling marketplace but also availability of lawyers in Georgia. Nonetheless, we finally filed T-Bolt's antitrust lawsuit in 1982; named as defendants were: National Wrestling Alliance, Georgia Championship Wrestling, Jim Barnett, Jim Crockett Promotions,

Jim Crockett, Sr., Championship Wrestling from Florida and Eddie Graham.

Several months later, Jim Barnett's *booker* Ole Anderson called T-Bolt, inviting him to return to Georgia Championship Wrestling. That was a significant day in the life of Thunderbolt Patterson because he hadn't wrestled for an NWA promoter since January 1980. Now, four years later, his blacklisting was about to be lifted. Anderson told him, "Bolt, drop the lawsuit against Georgia Championship and you'all go after Barnett and whoever else you want to sue, and we can see if we can get you guys [T-Bolt and Wilson] back in. We're having an internal fuss - there's a big split coming in Georgia Championship." Split indeed. By now, Vince McMahon, Jr.'s War of 1984 reached Atlanta, and McMahon's offer to buy Georgia Championship caused a major schism among GCW stockholders. The Brisco brothers wanted to sell to McMahon - it developed later they were promised jobs with McMahon (as is discussed in more detail in a later chapter). But T-Bolt said he wasn't interested in returning to Georgia Championship. With his lawsuit pending, he had a good chance of at least getting a substantial settlement. The trial was scheduled to begin shortly. A few weeks later, I checked in with the Atlanta office of the Justice Department to see how their latest antitrust investigation was progressing. Karen Lautz, the local Justice attorney, said, "Jim, it sounds like everything has settled down." I said, "What?" And she said, "Well Georgia Championship Wrestling has been sold to Vince McMahon, Barnett has left the area and there's been a split in his group with Fred Ward and Ole Anderson setting up their own promotion. There's going to be some competition, now." I thanked her for talking with me.

Finally fed up with Justice Department disinterest in wrestling's illegalities, I went public with my *campaign* to clean up pro wrestling in the fall of 1984. It began when I telephoned Dick Lane, a state representative in the Georgia Assembly. I did not know Lane, but I knew his reputation as a hard-working, dedicated Democratic representative from East Point, Georgia. The occasion for my telephone call was an article in one of

Atlanta's newspapers about Dick Lane's recent success in persuading Georgia's legislature to establish state regulation of boxing. Georgia's belated decision to establish a boxing commission was everywhere applauded because it brought the state into the twentieth century insofar as boxing was concerned.

So I called Dick Lane to tell him that although boxing regulation was a good thing, the state of Georgia still did not regulate pro wrestling, as was the practice with most state commissions. When I asked why Georgia didn't also regulate wrestling, Lane said he had specifically inquired about wrestling at the time the boxing bill was drafted.

"They told me there were no problems in professional wrestling," he said.

"Well, who told you that?" I asked.

"The wrestling promoters," Lane said.

"Oh my God, you got it from the very people you don't want to hear it from. They're not going to tell you anything," I said.

"Tell me about it," he replied.

And so I rattled off the litany of abuses and problems - the NWA's national monopoly and Georgia Championship's regional monopoly, their boycotting of independent promotions and blacklisting wrestlers, the absence of decent working conditions for wrestlers who worked without medical coverage or other benefits and without contracts, and were paid whatever promoters decided to give them - and I told him about my experiences in wrestling promotion at the Omni and elsewhere.

Lane was surprised to hear what I told him, and he said, "Well Jim, if it's like that, we've got to do something about it, and I think I can help. I was not aware of any problem in wrestling, but if things are the way you have described it, we'll get wrestling under the athletic commission, too." Lane said he would go to work on starting an investigation of wrestling in Georgia. When Lane offered to help, I felt ecstatic, sensing a genuine quickening of the heart and spirit.

By now, I had already talked to so many people and written the same letter so many times, all with the same stonewalling response. I'd even tried to interest labor leaders in helping me organize a national union for

wrestlers. I had written to Ed Asner, president of the Screen Actors Guild, to ask about SAG's possible inclusion of pro wrestlers; Asner (who played the role of wrestling promoter in Verne Gagne's movie *Wrestler)* replied, "For years, professional wrestling has insisted it is a legitimate professional sport . . . That may be a stumbling block. I suggest you get in touch with Alan Jay Nelson." So I wrote to Nelson, president of the American Guild of Variety Artists; Nelson replied, "I'm more than interested in trying to help you organize, but the only way I can help you is you must get as many professional wrestlers as you can to stand with you." Then I wrote to John Hall of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and he flew to Atlanta to meet with T-Bolt and me; Hall said, "Jim, how many wrestlers can you get to sign?" I told him I could get at least half of them. Hall asked, "Well, where are they?" I said they were all over the country, and contacting them would not be easy. I told Hall we needed financial support to establish a newsletter, an 800 telephone number and office space. I told him T-Bolt and I could be his union organizers, that we'd travel to every wrestling city in the country to talk with wrestlers. I told him I had some understanding of what was involved because I'd been a strike coordinator for the Rams when we were about to go on strike. John Hall listened politely, paid for an expensive dinner, thanked us for our interest and flew back to New York. Later, he said AFTRA was too busy to consider unionizing pro wrestling - at the time, he said AFTRA was appealing a large lawsuit and in the middle of working out a merger with SAG.

My inquiries to SAG and AFTRA were not the only strings in my fiddle. As a member of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA), I had previously contacted our NFLPA leadership in 1978 and 1979. On two occasions, Ed Garvey flew me to Washington to talk with the union's leadership. During both visits, I made my usual speech about the need for union protection in wrestling, an industry that then had about as many workers as pro football; Garvey and Gene Upshaw and Len Hauss, another University of Georgia alum, said they were interested in unionizing wrestlers but were busy with their own problems. I called Gene Upshaw again in 1983 just after the NFLPA published a 64-page document entitled *Q: Why a Percentage of the Gross? A: Because We Are the Game·;* I wanted to use that compelling rationale for organizing wrestlers, and told him so.

But Upshaw waffled about whether NFLPA was interested in helping unionize pro wrestlers. At this point, I was feeling like the guy who brought the skunk to a picnic - *who in God's world would have thought that there wasn 't a union in the country that was interested in organizing wrestlers?* After being rejected by the nation's three labor unions most likely to want wrestler membership - SAG and AFTRA and NFLPA, I concluded that *absolutely nobody wants to take pro wrestling seriously.*

Except Georgia Representative Dick Lane, who kept his word to start an investigation of wrestling in Georgia and later held legislative hearings in four cities. When Lane said the purpose of the hearings was to solicit testimony from wrestlers, wrestling fans, promoters and anyone else who had something to say, I rounded up some Georgia wrestlers who were willing to talk publicly. One of these was a young,

nice looking and articulate guy who used the name Eddie Mansfield. I had met Edwin Mansfield Fulford two years earlier when he and the former Oakland Raiders' Otis Sistrunk ("from the University of Mars," said Dandy Don Meredith on *Monday Night Football)* had talked with me about filing their own antitrust lawsuit against the NWA. Both had been blacklisted.

Eddie's problems with The Business started when he complained about his *payoffs* and the more he complained, the more difficult his life became. His five-year wrestling career began in Florida in 1977, and he later worked in Mississippi, California, Ohio, Texas, Iowa, Missouri and Georgia. He became a fan favorite, having been voted "Wrestler of the Year" by the Wrestling Fans International Association in 1980. After *booker* Gary Hart turned him *heel* - Eddie Mansfield, The Continental Lover - he drew large crowds in San Antonio where he feuded with Scott Casey. He went to Georgia, but after he injured both knees in a match with Austin Idol at the Omni in 1980, he was told to leave. Mansfield returned to Florida where he was given the Florida Television Championship, but when he was told to drop the *strap* to Wahoo McDaniel to build interest in a future match between Wahoo and NWA champion Ric Flair, Eddie argued with the *booker,* J. J. Dillon. Then Mansfield was invited back to Georgia to team

with Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie) in a tag match against The Freebirds. That night, Mansfield was paid $70 and the other three wrestlers $150 each, and Mansfield complained again. He quit, but none of the other wrestling territories would use him. His friend Terry Funk told him, " *You're not going to work anywhere, anymore*." At age 26 after five years in The Business, Mansfield was washed up and he was bitter about it. "This is a stinking rotten business," he fumed. "When you call somebody for work, they say that they're full or that you're either too old or too fat or too skinny - *you're always too-something when you are blackballed*.." By 1984, Eddie Mansfield was ready to talk publicly about the dark side of the wrestling industry.

Dick Lane's Georgia hearings opened in Atlanta on a Sunday in October, and it was one hell of a session. I testified first, talking about promoters' treatment of wrestlers by using the politically sensitive slavery metaphor. I said, *"The wrestling industry is an old plantation system - the most discriminating most abusive business left in the state"* My intention was to expose the wrestling promoters, not wrestling's trade secrets, and I was surprised when Mansfield announced to the seemingly stunned legislators that in addition to their other moral shortcomings, promoters also decided which wrestlers win and lose. " *The bookers*," Mansfield said, *"kill you with the eraser"* Suddenly, the Georgia legislators came to life, asking Mansfield to describe in detail exactly how wrestling matches were *faked.* Eddie obliged, and the committee looked surprised. When they turned to Thunderbolt Patterson for confirmation of Mansfield's alarming revelation, T-Bolt qualified Mansfield's *kayfabe* violation. He said *only championship matches were decided in advance.* Then T-Bolt complained about racism in the championship decisions. "They [wrestling's champions] came up beside me, all around me - Jack Brisco, Dusty Rhodes - but they got money and where am I? I was one of the biggest box office attractions, but I am black. I'm just a little black boy who's too big for his britches." The legislators looked concerned but then T-Bolt said not all of pro wrestling was fixed - he told the Georgia pols that non-championship matches were *actual contests.* Now, the legislators looked confused, and I wondered privately what T-Bolt was up to.

That first session of the hearings made front page headlines in both Atlanta newspapers the next day - WRESTLERS SAY PROMOTERS

HAVE THEM ON THE ROPES. Two days later, I called T-Bolt to make arrangements for going to the second hearing in Macon. T-Bolt interrupted me. “Jim,” he said matter-of-factly, “I’m going back to work.” He said he’d been asked by Ole Anderson and Fred Ward to return to the NWA’s circuit in Georgia. I was dumbfounded. I knew that T-Bolt had been talking with Anderson and Ward, but I interpreted that as the promoters’ continuing effort to break up the Wilson-Patterson team. Georgia’s wrestling promoters understood more clearly than Dick Lane or anyone else that T-Bolt and I had carried the wrestlers’ fight for freedom further than any other *disgruntled* wrestlers in the history of The Business. We had made a private pact years earlier that we would stick together throughout this struggle - to the point of accompanying the other in any contacts with NWA promoters or their agents, so we could each serve as a corroborating witness for the other. It had been a long, difficult journey for each of us but the pain of our failures to change The Business had been softened by our sharing it.

My association with Thunderbolt Patterson had been one of those poignant relationships in which a black man and a white man taught and helped each other: when I lived with T-Bolt's girlfriend Pansy Burris and her family in the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, I got a glimpse of the Black Experience. It had shaken me - the middle class white kid from a college-educated family in suburban Pittsburgh. But I had also been able to contribute a lot to T-Bolt's struggle, becoming his confidant and friend and helping him get his lawsuit filed, as I'd promised. Now, our partnership was over.

" T-Bolt, what can I say? God bless you. I hope you get everything that you deserve," I said, not quite recovered from the shock of his departure.

"Oh, I will, Jim," he said.

"And T-Bolt," I said, "Get it in writing."

"Oh, I will, Jim," he replied.

"Are you going to the second hearing in Macon?" I asked. I suspected T-Bolt had cut a deal with Anderson and Ward, but he didn't offer to elaborate on his sudden return to wrestling.

"Oh yeah, I'll be there," he promised.

When the second hearing was held in Macon, Eddie Mansfield and I sat in the witness chairs alone. Otis Sistrunk was now driving a beer truck in Columbus, Georgia, and again didn't show. Just before the hearing started, Dick Lane noticed T-Bolt's absence and walked over to me.

"Jim, where's T-Bolt?," Lane asked.

"What can I say? I guess they made him an offer he couldn't refuse," I replied.

Lane's eyes opened wide. "He's back wrestling?"

"You got it," I said.

And it was then I finally understood the curious answer T-Bolt had given to the committee at the first hearing when he was asked to confirm Mansfield's testimony that wrestling matches have predetermined outcomes and he said "only some of them." He was sending a message to Anderson and Ward and the NWA establishment that he was in a position to go either

way with his testimony, depending upon what they had in mind for him in wrestling.

Shortly afterward, T-Bolt dropped his lawsuit for a one-year contract that paid him $1,200 a week and a few weeks later, Thunderbolt Patterson and Ole Anderson defeated the Long Riders (Scott and Bill Irwin) for the NWA's national tag team championship in Cleveland. T-Bolt finally got an NWA *national* championship, although his deal with the devil meant he had to share it with his *booker,* Ole Anderson. Four months later, Ole scripted a split of his tag partnership with T-Bolt, and Ole was replaced by Manny Fernandez. Then T-Bolt and Manny were told to drop the tag team title back to Ole and his new partner, Arn Anderson in Charlotte. T-Bolt had been *jobbed* again, all for four months of world champion status.

That second hearing had produced witnesses for the other side, the Georgia Championship side of the argument. A guy who worked as the building manager for the Macon Coliseum that had a lease with Fred Ward said a state wrestling commission was a bad idea. Then two of Big Fred's wrestling fans stood up to say that a wrestling commission would increase the cost of tickets and if ticket prices increased, they wouldn't be able to buy them. At this point, I stood to say, "How can you take that position when the size of the wrestling industry in this state is big enough to accommodate medical care and ambulances without increases in ticket prices? Let me tell you about Ray Gunkel. Everybody in this room knows who Ray Gunkel was. Maybe - just maybe - he'd still be alive today if he'd been given a physical before his match, and they'd had an ambulance outside the building in Savannah that night." The Georgia pols nodded.

A week later, the third Georgia Wrestling hearing was held in Columbus, Georgia - the hometown of both Big Fred Ward and Eddie Mansfield; Sistrunk was still driving his beer truck and again didn't show, nor did T-bolt. Two more of Big Fred Ward's mouthpiece wrestling fans again argued that a state wrestling commission would make ticket prices unaffordable. Then two other wrestling fans stood up and supported me, which wasn't entirely surprising since there were a lot of University of Georgia football fans in Columbus, formerly the site of the annual Georgia-Auburn game. But the real star of that evening's show was one of Eddie Mansfield's old friends whose father had been murdered during a gangland war in the 1930s in Phenix City, Alabama, a sleazy little town often called

Little Chicago across the border from Columbus. Mansfield's friend stood up and talked about his father's death and the gangs of the Prohibition era and "*the wrestling mob"* He said, "Wrestling is a corrupt business just like the mob. My Dad was killed by the mob. Let's get a commission and clean this thing up." The Georgia pols looked moved and impressed.

At the end of the hearings, I walked to the rear of the room where I encountered Karen Lautz, the Justice Department attorney from the Atlanta office. Surprised to see her, I said hello and we exchanged smalltalk. But as I drove home that evening, thinking about who had said what at that Columbus hearing, I couldn't shake one particular conclusion that consumed me for many days afterward: in the eight and a half years I had been complaining to the United States Justice Department, *one of their investigators drove a hundred miles to sit at a meeting and listen.* It was the only thing the Justice Department ever did for me. What I didn't know that evening was the Justice Department was finally doing something besides politely listening to my complaints. Shortly after I'd asked Georgia senator Mack Mattingly and congressman Wyche Fowler, Jr. to inquire about the progress of the Justice Department's action against the wrestling industry - and after whatever *heat* was generated by the Georgia Assembly's own investigation of wrestling - the U.S. Attorney General authorized the Atlanta office to undertake a preliminary investigation. I learned later that a few days after the Columbus hearing, Karen Lautz met with NWA and GCW and Jim Barnett's attorneys at Troutman, Sanders, Lockerman & Ashmore, telling them that as part of a review of NWA compliance with the 1956 consent judgment "for possible modification or termination," Justice investigators wanted access to NWA files, bylaws, membership applications and meeting minutes for the past five years. The investigation proceeded, but it also never materialized in either further legal action against the NWA nor, as the NWA requested, termination of the 1956 consent decree.

Dick Lane's fourth and final hearing was held in Atlanta, and he finally coaxed a Georgia wrestling promoter to appear for questioning - not an NWA promoter, one of its *outlaws.* Ann Gunkel glided into the hearing room bedecked in several thousand dollars of animal fur, a slinky dress, abundant jewelry and dark glasses. As I amused myself with her attire, she walked over to me, motioning to the anteroom. I followed her out. "Jim," she purred, "Don't go any further with this thing. I'm trying to get some

towns going in North Carolina and South Carolina. You can work for us. Drop this, and leave it where it's at, Jim." I couldn't believe what she was telling me, and I laughed all the way back to my chair in the hearing room. I remembered the day in 1976 when she solicited my help in her lawsuit; her attorneys had badly needed a witness to that initial meeting and conference call on Chester Avenue when the NWA conspiracy to drive Ann out of wrestling was designed, and I had testified for her case. She had reciprocated by having her attorneys share information with mine and she provided a useful affidavit for my lawsuit (about Jim Barnett's bribery of the Omni's Tom Kuna with jewelry). But that was several years earlier after The Battle For Atlanta had ended in collateral damage for both of us; now, Ann Gunkel was trying to give wrestling promotion another go in Georgia and elsewhere.

As always, the wrestling business does funny things to people. On this night, Ann told Dick Lane and the other pols that Georgia didn't need a wrestling commission, and Mansfield and Wilson "don't know what they are talking about." She said the promoting business in Georgia was more competitive now than ever, and wrestling's monopoly days were a thing of the past. "The things Jim Wilson is talking about are 10 years old," she said. "He has been away from the sport for a long time. Most wrestlers are *not* unhappy and some of these men are making $4,000 a week. They don't want to hear about a union. If Jim Wilson called them up, they'd hang up the phone." But then one of Ann's former wrestlers from the Battle For Atlanta entered the fray, Rock Hunter (Robert Fink), who wrestled for 25 years before retiring in 1980. I first met Rock when I was wrestling in the Carolinas and he was a *heel;* two years later, he was one of the wrestlers who left Georgia's NWA promoters for Ann's *outlaw* promotion. Rock told the Lane Committee that blacklisting wrestlers had been common in his 25-year experience, and he talked about what happened when he and other wrestlers left the Atlanta NWA office to work for Ann Gunkel in the early 1970s. He said that after the Battle For Atlanta ended, wrestlers who left the NWA "found most doors closed to us. If you didn't go along with it, you didn't get paid. And there was always that chance they'd get nasty - bust up your car, bust up your head," he said.

Dick Lane's investigation of wrestling in Georgia reported in writing to the Governor and General Assembly in December 1984, and the report was not long-winded. It noted most other states already licensed wrestlers and promoters and provided minimum health and safety standards for wrestlers and spectators, and many states required surety bonds from promoters and taxed the proceeds received from wrestling matches. The Lane Report concluded, "*The wrestling industry should be regulated in a manner similar to professional boxing*;" and recommended the state's Boxing Commission be expanded to include pro wrestling.

A few months later, the Lane Committee's legislation to include wrestling with boxing attracted little discussion in the Georgia House, breezing through passage by that body on a 133-15 vote. But then, the bill went to the Georgia Senate where it died amidst controversy. Some politicians in the Georgia Senate complained the bill locked them into a catch-22: *if the bill were approved, the public would laugh at the senators for having equated wrestling with boxing -for concluding that wrestling is sport; but if the bill were defeated, the public might sneer at its senators for having concluded that wrestling is not sport - that it was fake,* a probably intemperate conclusion for a politician to draw in a state where much of the constituency loved wrestling.

But politics, like wrestling, has layers of hidden reality. Out of public view, some Georgia pols talked quietly about the amount of pressure mounted in opposition to the pro wrestling regulation bill by certain campaign contributors. The Senate had sent the bill to a screening committee chaired by Culver Kidd of Milledgeville, a man whose political maneuvering earned him a special reputation - *"the Legislature's most gifted practitioner of the sleeper hold"* said one Atlanta newspaper. This was the same Culver Kidd who once promoted wrestling for Fred Ward and whose prior political campaigns involved, as did Jimmy Carter's, circulation of photographs posing with Georgia wrestlers and free political advertising through appearances on Ted Turner's TV wrestling shows in the weeks prior to each election.

When the wrestling reform bill was killed by Kidd's committee, Dick Lane angrily told the press that Kidd acted at the request *of former Governor Carl Sanders who lobbied on behalf of Ted. Turner's lucrative*

wrestling programming which might be adversely affected by state regulation. Privately, Lane said Kidd told him he was "personally obligated to Ted and Carl," but would permit a Senate vote in the next legislative session. Kidd's personal obligation must have been substantial because the Georgia Senate did not vote on the bill in the 1986 session either. In the 1987 session, the Senate voted to regulate professional karate and kick-boxing, but not pro wrestling - because "it would serve no useful purpose to anyone and be a detriment to us," Kidd told Lane.

Up close, the politics of wrestling was ugly to watch, but familiar. The pols with clout talked like the wrestling promoters - maybe next week, next month, next year or the Twelfth Of Never. After the bill's first defeat in the Georgia Senate, Kidd publicly denied Lane's accusation of backroom dealing with Ted Turner's lobbyist. In a fumbling attempt to redeem himself, Kidd announced, "We need to do something about wrestling." He tried to defend his *sleeper hold* on Lane's wrestling reform by arguing the reason he held the bill up was to allow time for more hearings and research. But Dick Lane told me Sanders and Turner had "talked" to then Lt. Gov. Zell Miller, president of the Senate and the only person with authority to retrieve the bill from its procedural paralysis in Kidd's committee. Culver Kidd and Zell Miller were not the only Georgia pols in bed with wrestling; the politics-TV-wrestling connection was a Georgia tradition used by many local politicians, including Jimmy Carter, Michael Lomax and Andrew Young.

After the Georgia Assembly avoided wrestling reform in 1986 and 1987, my crusade to clean up The Business got bigger and broader. I wrote to Georgia Attorney General Michael Bowers, asking him to investigate Georgia's *Wrestlingate*, and I told him what I had learned about who had bought whom to deep-six wrestling's reform in Georgia. My proposal to investigate political corruption was turned down because "the path which this legislation has followed through the Georgia

Assembly is not unusual," his office replied. One of Attorney General Bowers' staff assistants wrote, "I find no evidence to suggest that any corrupt agreement has been reached by any member of the General Assembly to act for or against this legislation." In other words, the political wheeling and dealing over pro wrestling was not different from the usual wheeling and dealing in Georgia's distinguished deliberative bodies. In the

meantime, I waited to see the results of Culver Kidd's promise to undertake more hearings and research on Dick Lane's legislation, but no new hearings or research happened, either. In the next Georgia legislative session, Dick Lane's wrestling reform bill remained in Kidd's *sleeper hold.* In March 1988, Dick Lane told me his bill to regulate wrestling in Georgia was finally dead. Well, not quite dead, as would be seen later.

Another *politics-of-wrestling* brouhaha boiled in New York in early 1985 when state senator Abraham Bernstein introduced a bill to ban pro wrestling throughout the state. Bernstein didn't want to reform wrestling - he intended to eliminate it. A Bronx Democrat, Bernstein had been watching Vince McMahon's WWF brand of wrestling and concluded wrestling had "no redeeming features except to profit the promoters and those engaged in this field." Bernstein got himself appointed chairman of a committee to investigate wrestling - the New York Senate Democratic Task Force on Professional Wrestling - and it also held public hearings. In this case, however, the stated purpose of the investigation was to learn whether "professional wrestling constitutes good, clean competitive sportsmanship that should be encouraged, or does it represent ugly, violent brawling for dollars that adversely affects our children and promotes brutality in our society?" Bernstein's question sounded loaded, but I was sympathetic to wrestling investigations everywhere.

Unlike Georgia, New York state at least had an athletic commission, which was actually the first commission charged with wrestling regulation in 1921 under the chairmanship of William Muldoon, the saloon wrestler from the 1800s. And although the New York

Commission was regarded as a progressive force in establishing safety regulations for boxers, it acted more like other states when it came to pro wrestling: New York's wrestling commissioner Marvin Kohn had been appointed to successive terms by six New York governors, and he'd been attacked for cronyism in connection with the McMahon family that had controlled wrestling promotion in New York City for many years. After one Bernstein Task Force staffer interviewed Kohn at his office, the staffer

remarked privately about the collection of McMahon family photographs hanging on Kohn's office wall. In addition, the New York Commission had sometimes been criticized for irregular bookkeeping at wrestling shows, failing to file required reports, ignoring Commission rules that prohibited wrestling promoters from having a financial interest in wrestlers and failing to administer suspensions and fines to wrestling promoters who violated Commission rules.

But the well known relationship between the McMahon family and the New York Athletic Commission made the Bernstein Task Force's investigation interesting because the one person who had the most to lose by revelations of the industry's abusive practices was none other than Vincent Kennedy McMahon - Vince, Jr., whose re-named WWF was about to replace the old NWA as the world's most powerful wrestling promotion. Before Vince, Jr. came along, the lucrative northeastern wrestling market was *owned* by his father, Vincent John James McMahon - Vince, Sr., an NWA member who rotated talent and helped with boycotts and blacklisting. Before Vince, Sr., his father Jess McMahon (Vince, Jr.'s grandfather) was involved with boxing promotion in New York City. New York wrestling was very much a family affair, spanning three generations of the McMahon clan (and today, into the fourth generation).

About a year before the Bernstein Task Force was formed, Vince Sr. died and Vince Jr. took over the family's wrestling business, using cable TV to transport it to every TV market in the nation. By the time Bernstein started his investigation, Vince Jr.'s incursions against territories that NWA promoters thought they *owned* were so successful that wrestling promoters experienced genuine competition for the first time that anyone could remember. As the Bernstein Task Force got underway, I wondered if it would salute Vince, Jr. for destroying the NWA's monopoly - something the U.S. Department of Justice couldn't do over 30 years - or, whether it would discover that the old monopoly had been replaced by a new one - Vince, Jr.'s. It would at least be interesting to see whether Vince, Jr. could *control* the investigation and protect his family's political patron, Marvin Kohn of the beleaguered New York State Athletic Commission.

Like Dick Lane's investigation in Georgia, Bernstein's New York inquiry rankled wrestling fans and amused the press, but the New York investigation got more national attention. Nationally distributed wrestling

magazines, longtime partners in wrestling industry charades, published (phoney) reader letters of outrage that New York pols were not casting their net in the direction of larger social evils; elsewhere, real journalists predictably toyed with the New York investigation - “Makes sense, ban the only thing that sells out Madison Square Garden. I want to be there when they tell a packed house they’ve seen their last wrestling show. But I want to be up high in a corner someplace. I’ve never witnessed a riot before,” said one editorial. Another wrote: *“They want to ban professional boxing because it’s too real and they want to ban professional wrestling because it isn’t real enough”* Despite the flack from all sides, Bernstein’s New York Task Force held hearings on the 44th floor of the World Trade Center in October 1985.

All of McMahon’s New York-licensed wrestlers were invited to attend and testify but they didn’t show, of course; some sent nasty, unsigned letters and made harassing telephone calls to Lisa Sills, a Bernstein staffer who told me later she was frightened by “strange correspondence and phone calls.” And although McMahon didn’t trust his wrestlers to say the right things, the New York wrestling flap was too visible to ignore and so he commissioned attorney Arthur Klein to attend the hearings and defend his growing empire. Klein’s performance was a lot funnier than McMahon’s wrestling: reading from a script of tired clichés, half-truths and banalities, lobbyist Klein pitched pro wrestling’s redeeming social values: “What is professional wrestling? Is it an art form? Is it an athletic event? Is it entertainment? The answer is that it is all of the above,” he began. “These dedicated professional athletes maintain their vigorous training programs. When they’re on the road, they train at local gyms and health facilities and quite often, while there, help other young men and women by showing them techniques, explaining training styles, and emphasizing a health program with good nutrition,” Klein said to a room full of yawns. Predictably, McMahon’s lobbyist celebrated his client’s accomplishments (“he repositioned professional wrestling, taking it out of the strictly sports genre into a totally hybrid category of sports entertainment”), and commitment to public service and charitable causes (“Captain Lou Albano and Cyndi Lauper are now the national co-chairpersons to raise money for the dread disease of multiple sclerosis”). He said WWF wrestlers often “sat with tears in their eyes when they talked to [terminally ill] children whose dying wish was to meet the wrestlers,” that the WWF routinely provided

public service announcements on TV, used its magazine to raise funds for the Statue of Liberty restoration, and co-promoted wrestling shows with fire departments, police departments and school scholarship foundations. McMahon's lobbyist concluded, *"We are proud of what we do and we are proud of our positive impact on the society in which we live and work"*

The New York hearing's other participants also provided a mix of substance and sophistry. Family court Judge Daniel D. Leddy Jr. explained why he recently ordered two teenage boys to stop watching TV wrestling - because they were so obsessed with wrestling they injured each other with body slams, chokeholds and figure-four leglocks and frightened their mother when one of them applied a *sleeper hold* to her when she was stir-frying vegetables. Then Dr. Robert E. Gould, professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College and a director of the National Coalition on Television Violence, reported a study of TV wrestling's content that found illegal tactics outnumbered legal tactics by a ratio of 3:1 and children who watched wrestling were more violent than those who watched swimming. Dr. Gould concluded, "Mr. *Chairman, wrestling is absolutely fixed!'* Later in the hearing, cigar-chomping Burt Randolph Sugar, who previously assembled a picture book for wrestling fans, said: *"Fixed? I know the outcome when I go to see Hamlet, too, but I go to see Olivier.*"

These New York hearings were held on a day when I had other commitments, so I sent a written statement to Bernstein's staff and bought airline tickets for Eddie Mansfield and Zulu (Ron Pope) to go to New York and testify in my absence. Eddie Mansfield talked about his experiences with *payoffs* and blacklisting, the same testimony he gave in Georgia. But Zulu had not spoken publicly about his wrestling experiences for several years, and now was his chance to openly address racism in The Business. After my Atlanta picket in 1977, Zulu went to Calgary to work for NWA promoter Stu Hart. While wrestling in Canada and making a steady, guaranteed income, Zulu was invited by the NWA's San Francisco promoter Roy Shire to come to northern California for more money. By now, Zulu had married a white woman and after the usual racial tension among other wrestlers and the larger community, he was looking for another wrestling territory that was "more liberal," he said. Shire's San Francisco territory seemed to fit the bill, especially when Shire said he needed a black *babyface.* With the usual oral agreement, Zulu and his wife relocated in

northern California where he worked from September 1978 to January 1979. But instead of Shire's promised $1,000 a week, he was paid $25 a match with no travel or expense account. "I kept asking Roy Shire and Red Bastien [Shire's *booker* Roland 'Red' Bastien] about my guarantee - 'What about my guarantee? I'm starving to death!' I told them." After about 70 matches, Zulu was told to lose - to do *jobs* for other wrestlers - because he was no longer regarded as useful. Zulu objected. A few weeks later, Red Bastien told him, "Ron, I've got bad news for you. We think it would be better if you didn't work for us anymore. You'd be better off if you found another place to get booked." Zulu replied, " Red, you can't just cut me off like that!" And Bastien said, "It's not really up to me. It's up to Roy."

So after five months, Zulu was out of work again and he called his old friend Bearcat Wright for advice. After he told Bearcat what happened with Shire, Bearcat said, "If I was you, I'd go right to the NAACP. Get $200 and go see the NAACP lawyer Oliver Jones." Zulu followed Bearcat's advice, went to the NAACP in San Francisco and told Oliver Jones about the experiences of black wrestlers. Zulu

told the NAACP the gist of the black wrestlers' complaint was that minority wrestlers were required to perform demeaning stereotypes - "all Indians do a war dance and black guys have hard, hard heads and give head-butts and all Japanese guys bow, are sneaky and throw salt - and second, they're paid less than white wrestlers," Zulu said. Afterward, the NAACP investigated Roy Shire's *payoff* records for several years and found minority wrestlers were paid between one-third and one-tenth of what their white counterparts made for the same matches. The NAACP also concluded that a condition of employment for black wrestlers was to perform racially degrading behavior - enacting racial caricatures. Ultimately, the NAACP investigation caused the California State Athletic Commission to hold hearings and the main witnesses were Zulu, Bearcat Wright, Thunderbolt Patterson, Rick Thompson and Don Ross. The NAACP sent a critical report to the California Athletic Commission, which later adopted some of the NAACP's recommendations - they banned the *blade* and required TV wrestling shows to broadcast a disclaimer at the beginning of each wrestling program ("the *winners are selected by the producers").* In addition, the California Commission tightened up enforcement of its rules and yanked Roy Shire's promoter license *(Zulu took credit for one achievement that no other*

wrestler had accomplished - he got a wrestling promoter's license revoked). But the California wrestling reforms lasted only a few months before business-as-usual returned.

Afterward, Zulu worked for Antone "Ripper" Leone's small independent promotion in northern California and then wrestled in Nigeria, Japan, Oregon and Washington state. In 1983, he worked a few WWF shows for Vince McMahon, Jr. who paid him between $100 and $200 a match. At the time of the New York hearings, Zulu was working for Fritz von Erich's Dallas promotion, where he wrestled as a *babyface* in a *program* with Abdullah The Butcher, a series of bloodbaths with Abby doing the *blading* honors on a nightly basis. But Zulu was disgusted with his *payoffs* of $200 to $250 for his matches with Abdullah and the promotion's refusal to *push* him as a *babyface,* and so he quit and went home. A few days later, Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) called Zulu, asking him to come back as

a *heel.* Von Erich said, "Would you mind shaving your head? If you do that, I'll make you some big money and I mean *big money*." But after Zulu returned to Dallas, he was told to *put over* Crusher Yurkoff (Scott Bigelow), and Zulu complained. *"Put him over?* I thought you were going to turn me *heel?"* Zulu said. "They told me, 'Well, we are, but we want him to *eat you up* a little. He's gonna *sell* you a little, and you're gonna make a comeback and he's gonna beat you - but the whole time, we're gonna talk about you.' After I got beat, one of the other guys said, 'See, I told you - they just wanted to beat you to *kill* you.'" A few weeks later, Zulu quit the promotion when he was told by *booker* George Scott, "Ron, we want you to *put* the little von Erich *over,"* referring to Mike von Erich, youngest of the wrestling brothers. Zulu had already done *jobs* for Mike von Erich on *spot* shows, but that night's match was to be televised and he argued about his *finish.* Zulu finally quit, and was later hired by Ripper Leone to work as a security guard at Ripper's pizza restaurant in Lynwood, California.

Meanwhile, wrestling fans awaited conclusions from New York's investigation. Where was its final report? Publicly, Bernstein's Task Force said it was still working on its findings and recommendations; privately, it

Zulu summarized his wrestling career this way: “I quit The Business after 16 years. Of course, once you’re in The Business, you’re always in The Business. I should have made it because I had one of the better bodies in wrestling. *You can always get over with the fans, but getting over with the promoters is harder. They can make money with anybody they want to.* And they didn’t want to make money with me. *I was too black to be a champion but too light to be a -1didn ‘t look like what a nigger is supposed to look like*,” he said. After testifying at the New York hearings, Zulu admitted some ambivalence about doing it. “I spilled my guts up there - I told them about racial stereotypes, blacks’ *payoffs,* no pensions, no retirement, and I talked about foreheads and *blade jobs.* Afterward, Eddie Mansfield hugged me. But you know, *those hearings were a work, too,”* he said.

was engaged in a waiting game with the New York State Athletic Commission. Senator Bernstein wanted to give the Athletic Commission a chance to get its house in order before being blasted. So the world waited. The vigil began in December 1985 (seventeen years later in 2001, Bernstein’s Task Force still hasn’t reported). As happened so often in pro wrestling’s history of state investigations, politicians floundered when they ran aground on the fascinating but unimportant sidelight that wrestling is *worked!* As much as anything else, the experiences of the Lane Committee in Georgia and the Bernstein Task Force in New York demonstrate the general resistance to wrestling reform.

That resistance has two sources. First, the public seems to laugh off serious discussion about wrestling, the result of wrestling’s history of public deception despite countless pro wrestling exposés since the early 1900s. Second, when politicians investigate wrestling, they are inevitably sidetracked by pro wrestling’s *worked* character and then stumble when faced with bald political pressure applied by The Business. And although there is nothing new about influence peddling in American politics, there is little or no protest when it involves the pro wrestling industry’s lobby. Unlike other industries that lobby politicians, there is virtually no resistance to the clout exercised by wrestling promoters who have brazenly *bought* favorable treatment from the relevant powerbrokers - sportswriters, state athletic commissions and local politicians with outright cash payments, free

tickets, free TV time, drinks and dinners and campaign contributions. And to manipulate favorable public opinion, those investments have been supplemented by publicized donations to charitable causes, beginning with War Bond benefit matches in the 1940s, annual contributions to Guide Dogs for the Blind and U.S. Olympic wrestling teams during the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s and extending to the more recent "charitable" involvement of Vince McMahon's WWF with Make A Wish Foundation and its voter registration program in the year 2000. All these traditional wrestling industry PR investments seem to have produced their intended consequence because practically nobody believes that wrestling's promoters are The Game's genuine *heels.*

There is a postscript to our fight about wrestling reform and regulation in Georgia. The bill to regulate wrestling returned from the dead in 1988. When the Democratic National Convention came to Atlanta, T-Bolt and I were waiting and ready to take our fight to another level: armed with handbills and speeches and endorsements by prominent names from sport, religion and government, we were joined by local union activists to march on the state capitol. Although each protesting group represented its own special interest, our proposed bill to regulate wrestling in Georgia was soon back on the legislative agenda.

A few months later in October 1988, the wrestling world was shaken when Ted Turner bought the Crockett promotion, acquiring what was left of the old National Wrestling Alliance for about ten million dollars. As Turner's people were busy trying to revitalize the NWA's dying arena and TV shows, they stopped monitoring the Georgia legislature where in 1989, both the Georgia House and Senate unanimously passed Dick Lane's bill to put pro wrestling under state regulation of boxing, something endorsed by another famous Georgian, Evander ("The Real Deal") Holyfield, world boxing champion. Afterward, The *Atlanta Constitution* characterized the legislation's passage as *breaking the stranglehold:* "After the House dutifully passed the measure each of the past five years, committee Chairman Culver Kidd kept the bill, opposed by television magnate Ted

Turner, bottled up in his committee. The legislation, which is supposed to afford medical and financial protection for professional wrestlers, was pushed long and hard by two former practitioners of the entertainment, Big Jim Wilson, who was Vince Dooley's first All-American as a tackle in the mid 1960s, and Thunderbolt Patterson."

By now, there was talk on the streets that when the bill was finally signed by the Governor, he would likely appoint T-Bolt and me to the new commission. Among others, Dr. Hamilton Holmes, the first black man to have graduated from the University of Georgia, wrote to Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris suggesting just that; Dr. Holmes told Gov. Harris that appointing T-Bolt and me would be "good for the races." While the bill waited for Governor Harris' signature, a Turner Broadcasting spokesman confided, "This one completely slipped by us." A national wrestling newsletter reported, "One *fear of the promoters was that former wrestler Jim Wilson, who) has fought the industry in court and in legislative hearings in recent years, could be appointed to the commission.*"

Within days, Turner Broadcasting officials met with the Georgia Governor. One important person attending that meeting was Ted Turner's *senior advisor* for wrestling - Jim Barnett. Barnett told the Governor that Georgia's wrestling business had fallen on hard times, and one of Turner's objections to a wrestling commission was the 2% tax it would collect on ticket sales. And Barnett's personal lobbying effort was reinforced in writing when Turner Broadcasting senior vice president Paul Beckham wrote Dick Lane that "Turner Broadcasting feels this bill is not really needed" which is why "Ted Turner has asked the Governor to veto the legislation and we still desire that to happen." Two weeks later, Governor Harris vetoed the wrestling bill, telling Dick Lane he would "do it [sign the bill] for sure next year."

After the wrestling reform bill was vetoed by Governor Harris, I made a bunch of phone calls in search of an honest explanation for Harris' veto. When I contacted Georgia's U.S. Congressman Bob Barr (who later achieved national notoriety during the Clinton impeachment proceedings), Barr said there was probably a trail of paper behind the veto and he suggested I use the state's Open Records Act to obtain access to the relevant documents. Ultimately, I learned that Governor Harris' veto was based on a memo prepared by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, and I

didn’t have to sue to get a copy of it. When I finally got a chance to examine that memo, I saw more clearly what had happened: based on wrestling attendance statistics (provided by Ted Turner’s *government liaison officer for wrestling Jim* Barnett), the memo described a sorry state of wrestling economics in Georgia and concluded that wrestling regulation in Georgia would cost state government more than $56,000 a year. But the statistics cited were arena attendance figures in Georgia, a source of revenue for Turner’s wrestling company that by now had been supplanted by national TV ad revenue, national pay-per-view revenue and national merchandising. The statistics presented were not so much wrong as irrelevant, but the misleading argument nonetheless persuaded the Governor’s office that regulation of wrestling could not pay for itself, and the state’s boxing commission already was losing money because of so few boxing events. By now, it was too late for me or anyone else to do anything about straightening out the misleading argument. Meanwhile, one of Turner’s WCW officers said, “The [proposed wrestling] commission almost passed this time because it was sneaked through. If it’s attempted next year, we’ll be ready for it.”

Although Ted Turner’s fingerprints were all over Governor Harris’ veto of wrestling regulation in Georgia, the specific basis for Turner’s objection was no longer obvious. It went without saying that The Business had always objected to even the modest taxes that state athletic commissions usually collect, but there was now another potential problem with commission regulation that could be more costly - athletic commission medical exams could expose pro wrestlers’ rampant drug abuse.

It wasn’t so clear whether Ted Turner’s mandated veto of wrestling regulation in Georgia reflected his opposition to modest taxation or exposure of wrestler drug abuse, but it didn’t much matter: either objection was wrong.

Despite my prior failures to crack the *politics of wrestling* in Georgia, I wasn’t yet through fighting it and I revved up for yet another tussle in the state’s 1990 gubernatorial election. To resurrect the wrestling reform

legislation that Governor Harris had refused to sign, both T-Bolt and I hit the ground running when we formed our own political lobbying group, Pro Wrestlers of America for Medical and Safety Protection. After hustling support from state representative Tyrone Brooks, a black Democrat from Atlanta, we wrote letters to all six gubernatorial candidates. And we didn't beat around the bush; we simply asked each politician whether he intended to support safety and medical protection for Georgia wrestlers by signing the bill that had been kicked around for six years. Our letter also reminded each gubernatorial candidate that had such state regulation existed in 1972, our old friend Ray Gunkel might still be alive and that 28 other states had such regulation. Of the six candidates, all replied in writing except the old political dinosaur from desegregation days, former Governor Lester Maddox. State senator Roy Barnes (now Georgia governor) said he had supported the wrestling bill in Georgia's House of Representatives

and promised to give "careful consideration" to signing the legislation when elected governor; state representative Johnny Isakson said he'd always supported "efforts to set standards of conduct for various occupation groups" and would support establishing a commission to ensure the safety of wrestlers; state representative Lauren "Bubba" McDonald said he'd previously supported a combined boxing and wrestling commission, and Zell Miller, former Georgia governor and now U.S. senator, wrote, "I share your concerns and agree that all professional athletic events should be governed by adequate health and safety standards." Even former Atlanta mayor Andy Young (the same Andy Young whom Jim Barnett once said was "in his hip pocket with pictures to prove it") wrote: "I believe that pro wrestlers in this state are entitled to the same kind of basic medical protection afforded other athletes." Even U.S. Congressman John Lewis from Georgia endorsed our efforts to form a union for wrestlers and change *the independent contractor* status that prevails in pro wrestling.

The virtual unanimous endorsement by Georgia's 1990 gubernatorial candidates to regulate pro wrestling was so surprising, it made a good headline in *The Atlanta Constitution* during July 1990 - CANDIDATES BACK WRESTLING REFORMS. But the pre-election endorsements didn't matter. Ultimately, Zell Miller was elected Georgia governor (now U.S. senator), and the wrestling bill never reached his desk during his entire tenure.

Bureaucratic procedure required the wrestling reform bill be re-introduced in the General Assembly, even though it previously passed both the Georgia Senate and Assembly. But re-introducing it proved impossible when we lost the support of state representative Tyrone Brooks who told T-Bolt, “There’s just no support for this, anymore.”

Although we had kicked the door open to wrestling reform, the Georgia pols slammed it shut when Ted Turner and Jim Barnett issued their stop-order. Finally, wrestling regulation in Georgia was as dead as my old friend and mentor Ray Gunkel, whose life could have been saved by it. But not even Ray would have been surprised by the *politics of wrestling.*

Chapter 10

H E A V Y W E I G H T H E I S T

THE WRESTLING BUSINESS had started to change in the mid-1980s, and some of it was for the good. In early 1984 Vince McMahon, Jr. called the famous sports announcer Howard Cosell at ABC-Sports. Cosell had never heard of McMahon and was surprised when McMahon asked him to be the primary announcer on his wrestling telecasts. According to Cosell, their conversation went like this: “You can’t be serious,” Cosell laughed.

“I’m dead serious!” replied McMahon.

“Come on,” said Cosell. “Boxing was bad enough, and now you want me to end my career by calling phony wrestling matches? Good Lord, you must be crazy,” Cosell said.

“I am not crazy! You really should think about it!” McMahon snapped.

“I don’t have to think about it, Vince. I don’t want any part of it,” Cosell said.

“Well, fuck you, Howard! Wrestling’s going to be the biggest sport in this country, and I don’t need you anyway!” fumed McMahon.

“I wish you all the luck in the world, Vince.”

And McMahon replied, “Wrestling will be king, Howard! You’re making the biggest mistake of your life!”

McMahon was right, or nearly so. As it turned out, he didn’t need Cosell to transform his World Wrestling Federation (now WWE) into an entertainment empire and reinvent the structure and economics of the wrestling business in the process. And he accomplished something the United States Justice Department could not - he *killed the* National Wrestling Alliance.

The old National Wrestling Alliance's grip on The Business weakened in the early 1980s. At first barely perceptible, the decline of the old mat monopoly followed Sam Muchnick's retirement from its presidency in 1975. None of Muchnick's successors as NWA president (not Fritz von Erich, Eddie Graham, Bob Geigel or Jim Crockett, Jr.) could keep the greed and intramural bickering in check, and the shadowy architect of much NWA internal difficulty was the imperious Georgia promoter Jim Barnett. Although his presence and influence was shielded from the public, wrestlers muttered quietly about the clout of pro wrestling's *godfather.* NWA promoters had always been ambivalent about Barnett. Old-timers remembered his earlier days in Chicago when he and Fred Kohler tried to take over wrestling's TV business in the mid 1950s; later in the 1960s, Barnett and John Doyle tried the same thing. And although his financial success in Australia was uniformly admired, wrestling insiders knew a special tax dispensation for American businessmen paved his way to wealth. But his style and enthusiasm impressed other NWA promoters. Despite his effeminate manner, Barnett struck his colleagues as sophisticated and cultivated, a cut or two above the rough, carney coarseness of most promoters inside The Business.

After his election to the NWA board of directors in 1974, Barnett participated more actively in its business meetings, often offering formal motions for acceptance of committee reports. When NWA boss Muchnick asked the membership for personal indemnification against antitrust lawsuits in 1974, it was Barnett who led the cheering and proposed Muchnick's request be formally voted on. And it was Barnett who nominated Muchnick for re-election to Muchnick's last term in office. On the other hand, Barnett's unashamed egocentrism caused suspicion. Not even his street-smart colleagues believed he routinely lunched with prime ministers, dictators and kings. But his continuous name-dropping seemed to be backed up by some substance when, between 1977 and 1979, Barnett was appointed to various state and city fine arts committees by Georgia governors Carter and Busbee and Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson. When President Carter appointed Barnett to the National Arts Council, everybody in wrestling was impressed. After Muchnick stepped down from the NWA presidency, Barnett began his ascendancy in The Business. When Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) was elected to succeed Muchnick as NWA president in 1975, Barnett was elected first vice president on a split vote of 17 to 9

which formally documented the NWA's ambivalence about Barnett. Then von Erich asked Barnett to serve as the NWA's secretary-treasurer and the position's main job, *booker* of the NWA's world heavyweight champion. Barnett held that position for nine glorious years.

After one term as NWA boss, the gruff born-again Adkisson bowed out of its presidency. Contrary to the usual line of succession, the NWA's first vice president Jim Barnett did not replace him. Instead, the promoters elected Eddie Graham (Gossett), Barnett's partner in the Florida promotion. At that point, Graham asked Barnett to continue as secretary-treasurer and the NWA world champion's *booker.* The election of Graham as NWA boss, like Barnett's election to first vice-president, involved some controversy, a not so surprising development in light of their respective reputations for ruthlessness and bizarre double lives. Among wrestlers, Graham and Barnett were regarded as wrestling's odd couple - both were rich and powerful but perversely different in personal preferences and tastes. While Graham acquired yachts and airplanes and young women, Barnett accumulated art, antique crystal and young men; Graham relaxed on his yacht in Tampa Bay with a beer in one hand and a girl in the other while Barnett enjoyed symphony music, theater and dined with prime ministers, dictators, kings and now governors and mayors - and Presidents Nixon and Carter.

As business partners, however, Barnett and Graham were cut from the same cloth. They shared unspoken assumptions about how wrestlers were to be used and abused and promotional competitors destroyed. And they protected each other. When the NWA fought with Ann Gunkel in The Battle For Atlanta, it was actually Graham, and later Barnett, who masterminded NWA tactics and strategies. Afterward, when lawsuits were filed, Barnett arranged for Georgia Championship stockholders to indemnify him *and* Graham. In addition to Graham, however, Barnett acquired another and more powerful partner in the wrestling business, and his name was about to become well known inside the NWA: Robert Edward (Ted) Turner III.

Barnett's connection with Ted Turner surfaced at the NWA annual meeting at the Las Vegas Hilton in August 1977, when the membership argued openly about the destructive impact of Barnett's Georgia wrestling show on cable television. Eight months earlier, Turner's WTCG had uplinked itself to a satellite. All at once, Barnett's *Georgia Championship*

Wrestling was raining down two hours a week on every wrestling territory in the country! Angry NWA promoters wanted to know what in the hell Barnett was doing. Barnett didn't say much, except the satellite hookup was Turner's idea, not his; he said his champions were just Georgia champions and was willing to use other promoters' wrestlers on his TV shows. Coming to Barnett's defense was his old friend Vince McMahon, Sr. whose New York wrestling shows were carried on Madison Square Garden cable. What should he do, McMahon asked the NWA membership, stop promoting at the Garden?

But the NWA's cable controversy didn't go away, and the same questions with the same innocent answers from Barnett were recited repeatedly at NWA meetings in the late 1970s. By 1979, Turner's WTCG had become WTBS with an audience of15 million homes around the country. At this point, Barnett changed the names of his championship titles, dropping the *Georgia* part of each title, and booked his wrestlers for tours outside Barnett's NWA-approved territorial boundaries into Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan and Maryland. Some of the Georgia circuit's traditional weekly shows in Macon and Columbus were rescheduled to accommodate the emerging *national* tour. When asked to explain himself at one NWA meeting, Barnett snapped, *"Cable cannot be stopped!'* and again insisted his champions were *just* Georgia champions.

Scattered across the country, other NWA members were too far removed from Atlanta to notice an emerging revolution. When Atlanta's old City Auditorium was torn down in 1979, Barnett moved Georgia Championship's office to the new, flashy Omni Arena. By now, Ole Anderson (Al Rogowski) was Barnett's *booker,* and GCW promoted two wrestling shows six nights a week and taped another two hours of wrestling each week for broadcast by WTBS into 46 states. Under Barnett's direction, Georgia wrestlers expanded their tour in 1981 to Texas, New Mexico and Pennsylvania. At about this time, the name of Barnett's two hour TV show was changed from *Georgia Championship Wrestling* to - *World Championship Wrestling.*

When NWA members met for their annual meeting in 1982, nearly all of two days was devoted to arguing about wrestling on cable television. Barnett was defensive. Accompanied by his (and Ted Turner's) attorney Tench Coxe, Barnett still claimed, "Georgia Championship Wrestling had

nothing to do with this." He told other NWA promoters his Atlanta TV outlet just happened to also be a national TV *superstation.* To mollify other promoters, Barnett offered to use their "good wrestlers" on his TV show, and tried to convince other NWA promoters their top wrestlers could get broad exposure and effectively promote their appearances in any market where WTBS-TV had a significant cable audience. "This," he argued, "actually *benefits* the promoter using the wrestler in that market."

Barnett's attempt to convince other NWA promoters that his *nationalization* of Georgia wrestling was a good thing for all of them fell flat. Other NWA promoters, accustomed to the intricate frauds of wrestling's wondrous cons, didn't buy it. And although they knew what Barnett was up to - he'd tried the same thing several times before, there wasn't much they could do about it except complain. By now, Barnett was powerful with the backing of key allies like Graham, von Erich and Crockett - all NWA presidents during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Furthermore, Barnett's ace was that as the NWA world champion's *booker,* he alone controlled the champion's appearances in all NWA territories, which meant he could provide or withhold the large gates that world champions usually drew. Especially angry was Eddie "The Sheik" Farhat who years earlier paid Barnett (and John Doyle) $50,000 for his territory. Now, Barnett acted like he was repossessing it, The Sheik said. It was clear enough to The Sheik that Barnett was trying to take over the entire wrestling business with the weight of WTBS-TV's *World Championship Wrestling* as his battering ram. But if NWA promoters were angry, Ted Turner was ecstatic. In 1982, *World Championship Wrestling* produced a record Neilsen rating of 6.8 with a 22% share of the cable audience - the most watched program in all of cable television! With those ratings, Turner commanded top advertising rates, which is why Barnett's wrestling show became WTBS's biggest moneymaker.

At the same time, however, not all was well inside the NWA's controversial promotion in Atlanta. By now, Georgia Championship Wrestling was deeply in debt. In early 1982, Barnett apologized formally to GCW stockholders, saying "business has begun to turn around and for the first time in what seems years, we have become current in our bills." But Barnett added, *"The grim news is that apparently the Jim Wilson case will come to trial . . . This is an antitrust case and I am afraid legal fees will be*

expensive" During this time, Barnett borrowed substantial sums from the National Bank of Georgia and the Omni Arena to keep Georgia Championship afloat. To help his own financial situation, he sold some stock in the Georgia, Florida and Knoxville promotions to his Chicago friend Jim Oates. And to cut GCW expenses, Barnett made a deal with Jim Crockett, Jr. to jointly book arena shows. By late 1982, Barnett had reduced the number of Georgia Championship's regular arena shows but again told his other GCW stockholders there would be no profits to distribute - now, because of his cutback in arena shows.

It had been several years since Georgia Championship paid dividends to its stockholders, which then included Paul Jones (22%), Fred Ward (15%), Jack Brisco (10%), Bill Watts (10%), Jerry Brisco (9%), Oates (8%), Ralph Freed (5%) and Tim Woods (2%). At that point, Barnett retained only 18% of Georgia Championship, Inc. - he once owned 30% of the stock but had sold shares when he needed cash. Then, a minor ownership change occurred in late 1982 when Barnett asked Watts to sell his 10% interest to Barnett's *booker* Ole Anderson (Al Rogowski). With that seemingly small shift in ownership came a large change in the daily life of Georgia Championship Wrestling. After acquiring ownership interest, a critical and vocal Ole Anderson made his presence known: as the promotion's *booker* and now 10% owner, Ole took his situation seriously - he was now in position to get paid three times each night: once as main event wrestler, once as *booker,* and once as stockholder. And he wanted to know where his money was.

When Ole took over Georgia Championship's day-to-day operations, he studied the company's books and what he saw infuriated him: Georgia Championship had debt of more than $300,000. Some of its financial problems were caused by Barnett's expansion into new markets - Michigan, Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio; these expansions involved acquisitions of existing promotions and, therefore, costs to Georgia Championship stockholders. But apart from the business costs of Georgia Championship's territorial expansion, the company's shaky financial situation was aggravated by Barnett's discretionary spending - unnecessary, and probably illegal, in the view of some stockholders. Although he now owned only 18 shares of GCW stock, Barnett controlled the votes of enough GCW shareholders to give him a free hand in the promotion's spending, and Barnett's spending was legendary: telephone bills of more than $3,000 a

month and continuing invoices to the company for expensive personal gifts. Then there were the hefty legal bills submitted by Barnett's expensive lawyers Tench Coxe and Carl Sanders who defended Barnett, other GCW stockholders and Eddie Graham in those antitrust lawsuits. Another substantial Georgia Championship cost was Barnett's handsome salary (in 1982, $140,000 a year) plus his monthly travel expense account.

After reviewing Georgia Championship's finances, Ole Anderson accused Barnett of mismanagement. Coincidence or not, this came just months after Tommy "Wildfire" Rich was suddenly rewarded by Barnett with the NWA world heavyweight championship title for a few days under those peculiar circumstances whose meaning most wrestlers regarded as obvious. Ole called a secret meeting of other GCW stockholders (Jack and Jerry Brisco, Fred Ward and Ward's son- in-law and GCW partner Ralph Freed) and a few days later on New Year's Eve 1982, an angry Ole Anderson and Freed met alone with Barnett. It was not a happy occasion: Ole and Freed threatened Barnett physically and with legal action if he did not step down from his position as president and chairman of Georgia Championship Wrestling. The meeting ended when an ashen Barnett agreed to move aside if he could retain the title *president and chairman* of Georgia Championship Wrestling and not be embarrassed publicly. In exchange for keeping his remaining Georgia Championship stock, Barnett agreed to sign a voting trust that transferred his 18% voting power to Ole Anderson.

A few days later, Barnett tried to reverse his New Year's Eve agreement with Anderson and Freed when he asked his attorney Tench Coxe to draft a legal document in which Barnett renounced his endorsement of the voting trust he signed days earlier and made additional demands: he would step down from Georgia Championship as promised, but insisted on a salary and a monthly expense account and reimbursement for gifts and *total indemnification* in any lawsuits concerning his acts while he was president of Georgia Championship. When Coxe communicated Barnett's demands to Anderson, Ward and Freed, they made a counteroffer: Barnett could keep whatever job titles pleased him and he could retain access to the company's books and photocopying machine and health insurance and four complimentary tickets to each Omni show, but Barnett would *not* be reimbursed for gifts and would *not* be given a salary or expense account or indemnification any different from that provided other GCW officers. And

they offered Barnett $6,200 as partial compensation for his gift expenses during the prior year, but it was a take-it-or-leave-it offer and Barnett took it. After nine controversial years, Jim Barnett was kicked out of Georgia Championship Wrestling. He was still the NWA's secretary-treasurer and the world champion's *booker*, but that would soon change, too. A few months later in June 1983, Barnett sold his remaining 18 shares of stock in Georgia Championship to his old Chicago friend Jim Oates for $180,000, resigned from the NWA, moved out of his Colony Square condo in Atlanta and quietly disappeared.

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Despite Georgia Championship's internal problems, the rest of the wrestling industry was prospering. In fact, 1983 produced record crowds on most circuits. Of all those circuits, none was larger nor richer than Vincent John James McMahon's northeastern World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) that promoted in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and other northeastern cities. Despite Vince, Sr.'s weak talent, with colorless champion Bob Backlund and sloppy TV shows announced by McMahon's son Vince, Jr., the promotion often sold all 21,000 seats in Madison Square Garden, the biggest moneymaker the Garden ever had. In fact, Vince, Sr. made so much money for Madison Square Garden, he dictated the conditions of his own lease, one of which was his monopoly on Garden wrestling shows.

But The Business was changing, too. By now, several NWA heavy hitters had faded from the scene. NWA membership dropped from 31 in 1979 to 18 by 1982 and with the membership decline, some of the mat monopoly's central figures left The Game. Roy Welch retired from his wrestling empire in Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi and Nick Gulas sold his Nashville based promotion to Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler after a bitter turf war. LeRoy McGuirk stepped aside in Oklahoma, where Bill Watts took over. San Francisco promoter Roy Shire suffered a heart attack in 1980 and retired. A year later, NWA boss Sam Muchnick sold his interest in the St. Louis promotion to his partners Bob Geigel, Verne Gagne, Pat O'Connor and Harley Race. Later that year, the NWA's Los Angeles

promoter Mike LeBell closed his Olympic Auditorium promotion. And in Georgia, Jim Barnett was replaced by Ole Anderson (Al Rogowski), Fred Ward and Ralph Freed. Finally, Vince McMahon, Sr., battling cancer, sold his World Wide Wrestling Federation to his son, Vince, Jr. who then bought out his father's partners, Bob Marella (Gorilla Monsoon), Phil Zacko and Arnold Skoaland.

The old wrestling monopoly's personnel changes brought trouble. Although NWA territorial boundaries were still technically fixed and respected, massive changes in NWA composition clouded the traditional network of cooperation and restraint. And loyalty. By early 1983, Vince McMahon and Verne Gagne had moved into California, formerly the province of the NWA's LeBell and Shire. Shire, who had yet to formally announce his retirement, was so angered by promotional incursions into his territory he retaliated against McMahon and Gagne with two newspaper wrestling exposés that made headlines in *The Los Angeles Times* (PROFESSOR SAYS HE JUST GOT TIRED OF MAKING A FOOL OUT OF THE PUBLIC) and *The Sacramento Bee* (FORMER WRESTLER TAKES DOWN SPORT). Good old Roy didn't tell the press that accusing your competitor of staging fake wrestling was pioneered in the 1930s by Jack Pfefer in his turf wars with the wrestling trust of that era. Roy was doing the same thing and he later admitted his intent was to *kill* the wrestling market for Gagne and McMahon; some say he was successful for several months. Then another promotional war broke out in St. Louis where Larry Matysik, formerly Muchnick's general manager, promoted in competition with Muchnick's successors, Geigel, Gagne and Race. But St. Louis fans, accustomed to serious wrestling, top talent and honest promotion, didn't take to Muchnick's replacements. The decline of the St. Louis wrestling market foretold the immediate future of NWA wrestling around the country.

At about this time, Vince McMahon, Jr. moved into Ohio, previously controlled by Georgia Championship. In a stunning series of developments, Georgia Championship lost its agreements with both the Hara Arena in Dayton and WKEF-TV. Both GCW's arena dates and local television time were turned over to Vince Jr. exclusively in deals arranged by *McMahon's new vice president - Jim Barnett!* While Ole Anderson's Georgia Championship Wrestling battled behind the scenes over arena and TV

contracts in Ohio, some of his wrestlers were gradually disappearing - Paul Orndorff, Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie), Iron Sheik, Brian Blair and Tito Santana (Merced Solis), who said they were taking time off for Japan tours. Neither Ole Anderson of Georgia Championship nor other NWA promoters had a clue but Vince, Jr. had quietly chartered Titan Sports, Inc. in Delaware and was assembling a pool of new talent.

The old NWA monopoly didn't realize what McMahon was up to until December 1983 when in the course of 48 hours, McMahon revealed his hand: on the night after Christmas, Bob Backlund dropped the WWF's world *strap* to the Iron Sheik in Madison Square Garden, a title switch that surprised a lot of people, especially Bob Backlund who was permitted to save face when his manager "threw in the towel" at the end. The next night, McMahon and his growing troupe of wrestlers breezed into the NWA's showcase city St. Louis for an arena show and TV tapings. McMahon in St. Louis? NWA members' telephones buzzed throughout the night after they learned that McMahon literally bought his way into St. Louis with attractive deals for both local TV and the Kiel Auditorium; McMahon paid KPLR-TV, which had carried Muchnick's wrestling show and now that of Muchnick's successors (Geigel, Gagne, O'Connor and Race), $2,000 a week for an exclusive contract and a portion of the live gates at the Kiel, where he offered double the going rate for a similar exclusive deal. It was a bold, cunning move and the ultimate insult to the old wrestling establishment. It was also a declaration of the bloodiest turf war in pro wrestling history, one that would rage throughout the rest of the 1980s and 1990s.

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NWA promoters had always called him Junior. He was the tall, likeable son of Vince McMahon, Sr. who had controlled NWA wrestling in the northeast with partner Joe "Toots" Mondt, the aging mat impresario from Strangler Lewis days. When Mondt retired in 1969, McMahon's staff was joined by Vincent Kennedy McMahon - Junior. Young McMahon was initially given oddjobs in his father's business and he dabbled in related promotional ventures such as Evel Knievel's Snake River Canyon jump and

handled the American closed-circuit promotion of the 1976 mixed bout between Muhammad Ali and Japanese wrestling star Antonio Inoki. He even promoted his own wrestling shows in Banger and Waterville, Maine and small towns in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Junior was big enough at six foot three and 250 pounds to be a wrestler but he attended East Carolina University where he played football until he quit school. He then worked in a Greenville, N.C. meat market, married a southern belle named Linda and went to work as a salesman for the Sweetheart Cup Corp. Along the way, he became a bodybuilder, working out daily by pumping iron. That impressed some NWA promoters who admired the discipline required by gym work. Junior attended annual NWA meetings with his father in the late 1970s and, ironically, was present the afternoon in 1977 when his father, then chairman of the NWA's TV committee, warned fellow members of the impending glut of cable television and oversaturation of TV wrestling. At the time, McMahon Sr. drew out some depressing implications of cable TV wrestling for the health and well being of the industry's arena gates; just a few years later, Junior turned his father's warning into reality.

Junior's assault on the NWA was built on the back of a young, inexperienced but well built blonde wrestler whose prior athletic experience was Little League baseball, Terry Gene Bollea. Bollea began his pro wrestling career in 1978 as Terry "The Hulk" Boulder, a *babyface.* Jerry Brisco credits himself with introducing Bollea to the mat game in Tampa, where Bollea was a high school classmate of future wrestlers Mike Graham, Dick Slater and Steve Kiern at Robinson High School. Of the four, Slater was probably the best athlete, but it was Bollea whose six foot five inch, 275 pounds of pumped up physique attracted attention in wrestling circles. Despite his inexperience, Bollea's size produced physical charisma and he was an immediate hit in the south even when he turned *heel* and changed his name to Sterling Golden. Still, Sterling Golden was just another $200 a night, middle-of-the- card wrestler on Georgia Championship's weekly shows in Atlanta during October and November 1979. Bollea's first big break came in late 1979 when he was invited by Vince McMahon, Sr. to wrestle in New York under a new name - The Incredible Hulk Hogan. Then, after wrestling in McMahon's northeastern cities for several months as a mid-level heel, Bollea was moved up to main events with Bob Backlund and Andre the Giant. As *heel,* Bollea lost most of his matches, but a

televised bout with Andre in which he body slammed the giant brought national attention.

After Bollea finished his first Japan tour in 1981, he joined Verne Gagne's AWA circuit as *heel* Hulk Hogan. But when the crowds cheered him, the Hulk was officially turned *babyface* in feuds with Jerry Blackwell and future Minnesota governor Jesse "The Body" Ventura (James Janos). Along the way, he played Thunderlips in Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky III*. That minor movie role spread Hulk's fame among a new target group of wrestling *marks* - the young, manipulable rock audience, and his main event matches with AWA champion Nick Bockwinkel and the NWA's Harley Race set attendance records around the country in 1982 and 1983. As Hogan's popularity grew, so did his ego. As often happens in pro wrestling, Hogan started to believe his own hype and he complained about his match *finishes* when he was told to lose; he told promoters he wasn't going to lose anymore, and his popularity permitted him to get away with it. Hogan also wanted more money, commensurate with the gates he drew. Hulk thought he was worth more than Gagne paid him, and he was right - his presence drew an additional 3,000 to 5,000 fans wherever he appeared. But when Hogan also demanded Gagne give him the AWA world *strap*, Gagne refused. That proved to be a costly and probably fatal miscalculation for Gagne's prospering Midwestern promotion. While touring Japan in November 1983, an unhappy Hogan met with Vince, Sr., who invited him to jump to his WWWF. McMahon promised Hogan the WWWF's world *strap* and much more money (reportedly between $250,000 and $400,000) if he would leave Gagne and come to New York and the rest of McMahon's northeastern territory. Hogan agreed and even signed a contract - then, virtually unheard of in pro wrestling - and when he left Gagne, he brought wrestler David Shults and TV announcer Gene Okerlund with him.

A few weeks later, Vince, Sr. died of cancer, and Junior took over the family business. With Hogan in his stable of wrestlers, one of Junior's next moves was to get his wrestling show on USA cable TV in a time-slot previously held by San Antonio promoter Joe Blanchard. It was an easy sell because USA-TV executives were unhappy with Blanchard's chronically late payments of his $3,000 weekly bills and they were turned off by Blanchard's wrestling scripts with heavy *juicing* and offensive *angles* (such as wrestlers dumping pig dung on each other). By contrast, McMahon

Junior promised USA to pay his bills on time and provide wholesome scripts. Again, McMahon caught NWA promoters sleeping. They had initially feared only Blanchard's threats to start a *national* promotion, and were glad to see Blanchard's wrestling show leave the air. After lining up TV time on USA-TV, McMahon made significant casting changes. To pave the way for getting the championship *strap* on Hulk Hogan, McMahon got rid of the promotion's long-time champion, colorless Bob Backlund. Although Backlund had drawn crowds for McMahon over several years, and was reportedly paid around $200,000 a year, he was relegated to *underneath* matches after laying down for the Iron Sheik. When Backlund complained, he was given an ultimatum: either dye your hair black and *turn heel* - or be fired. Backlund refused to *turn,* and he was fired. The internal pushing and shoving became public when Backlund told *Sports Illustrated*, "I was told I wasn't worth marketing. I try to be a good role model for the kids. That stuff is very important to me. I was told my morals were too high," Backlund said. Commenting on Backlund's treatment by Vince, Jr., *S-I* observed, "How does wrestling, or at least the WWF, treat its own? It's no *babyface,* that's for sure."

Backlund's successor, the Iron Sheik, was a temporary champion (the McMahons never believed in *heel* champions, except in transitional roles). The hasty title switch from Backlund to Iron Sheik put *heel* Iron Sheik *over* for a hot feud later in the year with another All-American babyface, Sgt. Slaughter (Robert Remus) and established the storyline for another crowd-pleasing title change down the road - the agonizing against-all-odds triumph of a fighting- his-heart-out new, blonde, well built All-American God-fearing, say- your-prayers-and-eat-your-vitamins *babyface* champion - Hulk Hogan. To build *heat* for the ultimate showdown and *strap* change, Vince Jr. capitalized on America's rampant xenophobia that developed from the U.S.-Iranian hostage crisis: McMahon had the Iron Sheik carry an Iranian flag into the ring and ask the crowd to stand for the playing of Iran's national anthem. That *gimmick* got *heat,* especially in Madison Square Garden, and it literally created audience demand for a *blowoff match* between the wrestling world's most despicable *heel* and its most heroic *babyface:* what could be more deliriously wonderful than witnessing the Iranian's destruction by a blonde and muscled true American? And so in his first Madison Square Garden appearance in January 1984, Hulk Hogan *won* the WWF's world championship belt, crushing the Iron Sheik in five

minutes after a few close calls and a superman comeback. Two years later, the former Little League baseball player became the most popular and richest pro wrestler in history.

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Vince, Jr.'s wrestling war with the NWA moved to Georgia in spring 1984. The year before, Georgia Championship's wrestling business had dropped sharply, down about 60%. Still, Ole Anderson chipped away at GCW's debt and paid an annual stock dividend of $20,000. By now, however, two of Georgia Championship's owners, Jack and Jerry Brisco, were tired of hearing apologies for GCW's financial problems and they privately decided to sell out. At this point, GCW stock was distributed among eight shareholders - James Oates (26%), Paul Jones (22%), Fred Ward (15%), Jack Brisco (10%), Ole Anderson (10%), Jerry Brisco (9%), Ralph Freed (5%) and Gene Anderson (2%). In early April 1984, Jack Brisco telephoned Vince McMahon, Jr., asking about a wrestler friend who'd been injured. During that conversation, Jack Brisco told McMahon he and his brother Jerry had decided to get out of wrestling and were looking for buyers of their Georgia Championship stock. Within days, McMahon invited the Brisco brothers to meet him secretly at LaGuardia airport to discuss their proposed sale of Georgia Championship stock. McMahon told the Brisco brothers he wasn't interested in buying their stock unless he could get *control* of GCW, which meant acquiring GCW's contracts with Ted Turner's WTBS-TV and the Omni Arena. McMahon asked the Briscos if other GCW stockholders were interested in selling at $10,000 a share, and asked if they could persuade elderly Paul Jones to sell his 22%.

Days afterward, the Briscos met with Jones and he agreed to sell, despite GCW's "right of first refusal" on any outside offers to purchase stock. Then McMahon called Barnett's old Chicago friend Jim Oates, offering to buy either his stock or his votes in GCW. When Oates hedged, Jerry Brisco called him, urging Oates to sell. At about this time, the Briscos flew to Baltimore where Ole Anderson was *booking* and wrestling on a Georgia Championship show, and interrogated Ole about the company's

financial well-being. They told Ole nothing about their plans to sell their ownership shares in Georgia Championship to McMahon; instead, the Briscos' secret deal with McMahon was made quickly and quietly. Vince and attorney-spouse Linda McMahon flew to Atlanta and met privately with both Brisco brothers, Oates and Jones on the evening of April 19, 1984. That night, at about 10:00 pm., Jack and Jerry Brisco, Jim Oates and Paul Jones signed an agreement to *terminate* GCW's buy-sell provision intended to give GCW shareholders the right of first refusal. Ten minutes later, the Brisco brothers, Oates and Jones sold 67.5% of Georgia Championship Wrestling to Vince and Linda McMahon.

Control of Georgia Championship Wrestling - and more importantly its WTBS-TV contract with Ted Turner - cost the McMahons over $675,000. From the secret deal, Jack Brisco got $100,000 and Jerry, $95,000, Jones made $220,000 and Oates got $260,000. And although Oates went along with the sale, he later dismissed the Brisco brothers as "money-grubbers - they double- crossed Barnett," he said. Oates analyzed GCW's internal politics this way: Ole Anderson, Ward and Freed were "the insurgents" who didn't like the way Barnett ran Georgia Championship, and "the Briscos were the swing votes and they wanted to sell to McMahon. And the WTBS contract was the only real asset that Georgia Championship had." But the sale of Georgia Championship Wrestling to Vince, Jr. became embroiled in another brouhaha in the summer of 1984. When McMahon's WWF wrestling show debuted on WTBS in July, the program's large and loyal southern audience revolted against McMahon's replacement of Georgia wrestlers and popular announcer Gordon Solie. Faced with an avalanche of phone calls and telegrams, Ted Turner intervened by reinstating Ole Anderson's NWA group on WTBS, now renamed *Championship Wrestling From Georgia,* but giving it an early morning Saturday slot. Then, more trouble: McMahon argued with Ted Turner's insistence that WTBS wrestling shows be taped at Turner studios instead of wrestling arenas.

Shortly afterward, McMahon angered Turner again when he signed a contract renewal with USA-TV cable, a Turner competitor. McMahon's feud with Turner was resolved a few weeks later when McMahon sold Georgia Championship and its WTBS contract to the NWA's Carolinas promoter Jim Crockett for a cool $1 million - about $400,000 more than he paid for it. In a matter of weeks, the Georgia promotion was back in the

NWA and when the deal with Crockett was closed, McMahon told him, “You’ll *choke* on that million!” On that personal point, McMahon’s prediction would prove to be correct, but McMahon’s larger dispute with Ted Turner was remembered and it would come back to haunt him several years later down the road.

A few months after their sale of Georgia Championship Wrestling stock, the Brisco brothers joined Vince Jr.’s new vice president Jim Barnett in Stamford, Connecticut at McMahon’s WWF corporate parent, Titan Sports. And Jack and Jerry Brisco - the two guys who said they wanted out of wrestling - resumed their careers as wrestlers. With an upgraded talent pool and Hulk Hogan his new champion, Vince, Jr. assembled a TV brain trust to plan the next phase of his assault on the wrestling world. McMahon correctly assumed successful syndication of his TV wrestling show would require cutting edge technical sophistication and glitz - not so much for viewers as for station managers and advertising buyers who can be impressed with lighting, mixing, sound sweetening and wraparounds. Vince’s new *marks* were TV people, not wrestling fans.

At the time, the country's most technically sophisticated TV wrestling show was produced by the NWA's Dallas promotion, owned and operated by Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson). The nationally syndicated, popular and glossy *World Class Championship Wrestling* regularly featured the good looking, born-again *babyface* von Erich sons - David, Kerry, Kevin and Mike - who galloped into the arena with rock music introductions and applied wet kisses to teenybopper female fans on the way to the ring. The show was an odd combination of violence, sex and religion with air time donated to the promotion's evangelical chaplain, Rev. Gary Holder, a Baptist preacher. To out glitz the Dallas TV show, McMahon hired Baltimore's Video One to give his TV wrestling even more gloss: cameramen and directors were trained to film *worked* punches, dropkicks and *bumps* (like Hollywood does with studio punches and stage fighting) for maximum visual effect; attention was given to entrance theme music and color, including design of wrestler costuming; wrestlers were told to shave their underarms. The shows were videotaped in arenas, not TV studios, where crowd noise and color added to the overall impact. Announcers dressed in tuxedos, adding to the spectacle aura, and referees donned long-sleeved blue dress shirts with black bow ties - the traditional, dignified uniform for boxing referees at Madison Square Garden. To insure desirable crowd shots, McMahon *planted* the first two ringside rows of spectators at TV tapings. And kids in the crowd were provided with carefully lettered signs ("HULKAMANIA!"), thoughtfully prepared by McMahon's staff. The WWF's televised wrestling shows were expensive to produce, but they were appealing, especially to ad agencies and advertisers.

McMahon also changed TV wrestling's traditional content. Knowing that viewer demographics determined TV sponsorship, McMahon targeted a new audience segment of special interest to consumer product advertisers - the young, punky, adolescent subculture. At first, he showed no blood, telling his wrestlers to lay off the *blade* in televised matches in order to more easily qualify as family entertainment; fans who wanted blood had to come to an arena and pay to see it. And in a major departure from wrestling's promotional practice, McMahon made no attempt to defend or enhance pro wrestling's requirement for *suspended disbelief.* To the contrary, he mocked wrestling's credibility with stunts and *gimmicks* so whacko that *nobody* could believe. Calling it *sports entertainment* rather

than *wrestling,* he tailored his TV shows' scripts with slapstick comedy, using pop rock's Cyndi Lauper and TV actor Mr. T.(Lawrence Tero of *A-Team)* to get the new audience's hip attention. An hour of McMahon's TV wrestling show contained as little as 13 minutes of wrestling - the balance devoted to stunts and skits and talk. Traditional wrestling fans dismissed McMahon's new style as clowning, but McMahon's wrestling was not designed for the traditional fan.

More talent raids of other promoters' top wrestlers were greased by contracts and big money, both of which most wrestlers found impossible to turn down. In an industry that had never used written contracts on a general basis, McMahon's lucrative offers enabled him to hoard the cream of wrestling's crop; those contracts also permitted McMahon to keep it by seizing control of wrestlers' character names - his contracts *required* wrestlers to provide Titan Sports with *exclusive rights* to their ring names and costumes - *their entire wrestling persona.* With that novel and arguably legal twist, McMahon insured that even if wrestlers left his fold, they couldn't take their acts with them. And, if they did, McMahon would sue them. Meanwhile, McMahon flooded local TV with his WWF wrestling shows. In the nation's largest TV markets, McMahon bought the time slot of each stations' best-rated wrestling show or the highest rated available non-network time slot and promised to double the station's revenue from the prior wrestling show. In return, McMahon demanded exclusivity, which meant stations had to drop other wrestling shows, usually NWA shows. McMahon's new TV deals retained six minutes of each show's advertising time which he either sold to commercial sponsors or used to hype his own arena shows and merchandise. All of this was quite a *coup* - McMahon's syndication arrangements gave him not only control of TV wrestling but a new source of revenue.

By now, American TV viewers found an unprecedented 20 hours of wrestling available each week, and to further entice advertisers, McMahon combined all of his TV ratings into one number by adding them together. His creative math permitted him to tell *Advertising Age* that *almost 22%* of the United States population was watching his wrestling. With those ratings claims, McMahon lured national advertisers to his syndication package, something previously unheard of in wrestling. Once he established his WWF on local television by paying more than $100,000 a year in many

cities ($400,000 for WNEW-TV in New York), McMahon followed up by booking arena shows in parts of the country that NWA promoters thought they *owned.* After his St. Louis invasion, McMahon moved into Minneapolis, Dallas, Atlanta, Montreal, Richmond, Portland, Chicago and other cities. He not only bought NWA promoters off television with more attractive deals for the stations, he also tried to have NWA promoters locked out of arenas where they'd been promoting for many years. Vince, Jr. played hardball: where possible, he got exclusive arena leases by paying twice the going rate and he threatened to take his business to other venues if his exclusive arena leases were canceled. While conquering the NWA's old arrangements with local television and arenas, McMahon introduced spinoff merchandising - T-shirts, wristwatches, headbands, posters, belt buckles, video tapes, wrestling dolls, magazines and other products. Although selling wrestling merchandise was pioneered in Japan, no American wrestling promoter had tried to sell anything except beer, popcorn and autographed photos of wrestlers. Now, sales of wrestling merchandise began to supplant McMahon's arena gate receipts and TV ad revenue in wrestling's new economy.

All of McMahon's promotional strategy and tactics came together in spring 1985 when he staged a supercard extravaganza - an idea taken from Crockett's *Starrcade,* but renamed *Wrestlemania. Sports Illustrated* observed, "McMahon's promotional work for *Wrestlemania* was brilliant, successfully propagating the Big Lie that wrestling had somehow become the new barometer of hip for the 1980s." The print and electronic press did what McMahon was counting on: they didn't believe wrestling was sport, but they bought it as entertainment. More importantly, they sold it. Jumping on what seemed to be a sure thing, NBC-TV let producer Dick Ebersol (who became president of NBC Sports in 1989) and McMahon create a *Saturday Night's Main Event* series and CBS-TV aired *Hulk Hogan's Rock* N *Wrestling,* a kids' Saturday morning cartoon show. By now, wrestling's resurgence had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although McMahon modernized wrestling promotion, his labor relations were largely old-school, consistent with The Business' time-honored tradition of treating wrestlers as replaceable chattel, as rotatable serfs. Although McMahon used written contracts to seduce NWA talent from his promotional competitors, his contracts were drafted by his own lawyers, not wrestlers' agents or attorneys. As such, McMahon's labor contracts were one-sided, and few if any wrestlers who signed them understood the consequences of signing away their ring names, costumes and *gimmicks.*

One of McMahon's first contracted wrestlers was Sgt. Slaughter (Robert Remus), who performed the American super-patriot *gimmick* in one of wrestling's hottest acts in 1984. During the U.S.-Iran hostage crisis, Slaughter's feud with Iranian Iron Sheik drew sellouts around the country. At the time, the WWF was grossing about $700,000 a week from arena shows and probably $1 million a week from merchandising, of which a considerable portion came from Slaughter's *Cobra Corps* paraphernalia. Although Slaughter was under contract with McMahon for $6,000 to $10,000 a week, depending on the gates, he also was promised 5% of gross revenue from sales of Sgt. Slaughter merchandise. Slaughter was earning a handsome salary, but his share of the merchandise money was not what he'd been promised. When Slaughter's contract came up for renewal, he hired an attorney to press McMahon for the merchandise money promised. In anticipation of a new contract, Remus trademarked the Sgt. Slaughter name and told McMahon that WWF had limited rights to use it and Slaughter's attorney warned McMahon about his unauthorized merchandising of a Sgt. Slaughter doll. In response, McMahon fired Slaughter and replaced him with Michael James Kirchener who was given Slaughter's super-patriot character *gimmick* and billed as Corporal Kirchener. Outraged by McMahon's treatment, Slaughter took his patriot act to other promotions and sued the WWF for trademark violations and back pay. Later, the parties settled out of court, agreeing that Slaughter would get modest royalties from his merchandise. Afterward, *McMahon instructed the Slaughter doll manufacturer to stop making it!*

After McMahon's initial assault on The Business, *only five* regional promoters from the old wrestling establishment were left - Jim Crockett in the Carolinas, Verne Gagne in the Midwest, Eddie Graham in Florida, Fritz von Erich in Dallas and Bill Watts in Oklahoma. But the remaining five promoters were as distrustful of each other as of McMahon: Watts and von Erich had been partners in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, but were now at each other's throats in litigation; Gagne feuded with Walter (Wally) Karbo, his longtime Minneapolis partner and *frontman.* And in Florida, there was more trouble: on Monday morning, January 21, 1985 emergency room doctors at Tampa's St. Joseph's Hospital examined a bloody corpse whose right temple showed a gunshot wound. The dead man's real name was Edward Gossett - Florida's NWA promoter Eddie Graham had committed suicide.

Eddie Graham's suicide was not publicized outside Florida, but his death at 55 and its circumstances said a lot about the darker side of The Business, the side that Graham lived on. Like other wrestling promoters who were ruthless with wrestlers, Graham tried to sanitize his business practices with some orchestrated publicity - his donations to the University of Florida's *Eddie Graham Wrestling Room* and to the *Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch* for homeless kids. His political clout in Florida had been sufficient to prevent that state from establishing a wrestling commission. Graham was respected by only his fellow promoters who enjoyed his yacht and feared his power, and he was humored by countless girlfriends whose apartments he paid for. In wrestling, his most enthusiastic acolyte was his TV wrestling announcer Gordon Solie, regarded by some as the Walter Cronkite of TV wrestling. But Graham was universally hated by the wrestlers who bought cars through his connections, did his dirty work with command *stretchings* and paid for his lifestyle - his *high overhead,* they called it. After his suicide, wrestlers said, *"He did the right thing"* Which was a cruel thing to say, but wrestlers despised Graham because of how he treated them. Ultimately, the high costs of Graham's double life led him to some quick but risky solutions in illegal land and drug deals. When caught at it, there was no resolution available except the only form of self-destruction he had not yet tried.

After Eddie Graham shot himself, only *four* major players in the old wrestling monopoly remained - Crockett, Gagne, von Erich and Watts.

Shriveling in numbers and clout, the NWA's survival depended upon cooperation of its remaining promoters. But instead of combining forces to turn back McMahon's national takeover, remaining promoters fought among themselves. By 1985, the NWA's internal bickering and backstabbing were crippling McMahon's remaining competitors. The Memphis promotion, run by Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler, was too small to wield power and the failure of Muchnick's successors in St. Louis effectively eliminated Bob Geigel from a position of influence although he was named NWA president as a *front* for Jim Crockett; Oregon's Don Owen was not a major player because of his territory's small size. But Lawler convinced Crockett and Gagne, both of whom disliked and distrusted the other, to sit down and talk about cooperating and Gagne invited Chicago's Eddie Einhorn to attend their meeting. With Einhorn's help, the meeting resulted in a joint promotion and TV show called *Pro Wrestling USA* .

The plan was to collectively promote arena shows in certain cities to counter McMahon's invasions, and Einhorn got the group a time slot on New York's WPIX-TV at a stiff $8,000 a week and found sponsors for the show. To spearhead northeastern shows, the Einhorn *Pro-USA* group got the WWF's *living legend* Bruno Sammartino to join them, but then Bruno suddenly was invited to settle an old lawsuit against McMahon; that settlement required Bruno to drop his lawsuit in exchange for a lucrative WWF TV commentator job for himself and WWF wrestling work for his son David. But with or without Sammartino, Einhorn's joint venture was doomed to failure from internal haggling: Fritz von Erich agreed to have son Kerry perform on the *Pro-USA* shows, but insisted Kerry not lose by pinfalls, submission, *DQs*, countouts or any other way; it was tough to build scripts for Kerry that both satisfied audience expectations and met his father's approval. Then Gagne and Crockett couldn't agree on the arithmetic for counting tickets, and their mutual distrust exploded after a jointly promoted outdoor show in Chicago's Comiskey (White Sox) Park in fall 1985. At the bottom of their argument was a seemingly simple question: did the Chicago gate draw $288,000 (Crockett's count) or just over $200,000 (Gagne's count) or $250,000 (everybody else's count)? When the Chicago gate controversy couldn't be resolved, Crockett canceled his wrestlers from the rest of the tour and Fritz von Erich yanked Kerry, demanding more money. With that, the organized resistance to McMahon's wrestling industry takeover ended. Years later, Eddie Einhorn said, "We

couldn’t keep those guys together. They all wanted to run it and do it their own way. We promoted a few shows and got some good crowds but then they started fighting with each other and we never got good cards. You’ve got to stay at it and spend the time. These other guys just wouldn’t cooperate.”

As a last resort, McMahon’s remaining competitors filed lawsuits - antitrust lawsuits, ironically. The sweet irony was that the remaining NWA promoters had been victimized by the same rough and dirty business tactics they had themselves used for years in their fights with *opposition* promoters - having their top wrestlers stolen and finding themselves locked out of arenas and TV stations in territories they thought they *owned.* The ultimate *shoot* was McMahon beating them at their own game, using *blocking* tactics that wobbled around illegal restraint of trade. After McMahon and his vice president Jim Barnett persuaded Dayton’s WKEF-TV and Hara Arena to replace Georgia Championship with McMahon’s WWF on an exclusive basis, Georgia Championship (now operated by Ole Anderson, Fred Ward and Ralph Freed) sued McMahon for trying to “put Georgia Championship Wrestling out of business!” The lawsuit claimed McMahon and Barnett were trying to do the same thing with other TV stations and arenas in Columbus and Cincinnati and in Huntington, West Virginia. McMahon had essentially admitted it, telling NBC-TV’s *Sportsworld,* “One day we hope to be recognized as the premier source of sports entertainment in the world,” and he already controlled wrestling in Washington, D.C., New York City, Baltimore, Boston and other cities in Eastern Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware and New Jersey. The Georgia NWA group also alleged that McMahon contacted Georgia Championship wrestlers and interfered with their *oral contracts* by persuading them to leave GCW, threatening to blacklist them if they did not. And Georgia Championship wrestler Buzz Sawyer (Bruce Moyan) testified McMahon offered him $7,000 to get Georgia Championship into difficulty with Ted Turner by knocking over a WTBS-TV camera and damaging it during a taping at Turner’s Atlanta studios. Months later, however, Georgia Championship’s lawsuit against McMahon was dropped when McMahon’s earlier acquisition of Georgia Championship Wrestling was ruled legal.

At about this time, the NWA's Jim Crockett Promotions also sued McMahon, accusing his WWF of illegal trade practices and violation of federal racketeering statutes in Virginia. Crockett claimed McMahon fraudulently obtained exclusive leases with both WTVR-TV and the Richmond Coliseum in 1985 when McMahon told the TV station and arena that Crockett would no longer be promoting shows at the Coliseum. Crockett's attorneys argued McMahon's exclusive arrangements for both the arena and TV in Richmond deprived the NWA of suitable facilities for wrestling and was calculated to expand McMahon's growing wrestling monopoly. McMahon answered Crockett's legal claims with his own lawsuit alleging Crockett monopolized wrestling promotion in Richmond, Charlotte, N.C., Norfolk, Va., Greensboro, N.C., Spartanburg and Greenwood, S.C. and Savannah, Georgia prior to McMahon's arrival in the area. Both sides to the Crockett- McMahon dispute told some truth: *both McMahon and Crockett were trying to monopolize wrestling promotion at various locations throughout the country.* To no one's surprise, both lawsuits were settled out of court when Crockett agreed to drop his charges in exchange for McMahon agreeing to let Crockett have one date a month at the Richmond Coliseum. And neither Crockett nor McMahon admitted wrongdoing, of course.

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As Vince McMahon's onslaught continued into 1986 and 1987, he unleashed more talent raids and territorial incursions against remaining promoters. After *Wrestlemania II* grossed about $19 million and *Wrestlemania III* about $17 million, the rest of the wrestling industry pretty much did what McMahon planned for: it started to die. By now, the withering National Wrestling Alliance was no longer either a wrestling monopoly nor a cooperative of McMahon's competitors. At this point, Jim Crockett, Jr., heir to the lucrative Carolinas and Virginia wrestling territory, manipulated the NWA as his private province and shared the NWA world champion and other star wrestlers with the dwindling number of NWA promoters only if he were treated as co- promoter of the shows, getting 50% of the gate. That policy further discouraged promotional cooperation among

McMahon's competitors, and it set the once powerful NWA into sinking sand.

The old NWA was dealt another blow in early 1986 when Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) seceded from it, establishing his own independent world championship (of two cities, Dallas and Ft. Worth).

But then one of von Erich's top *heels,* Gino Hernandez (Charles Wolfe), was found dead of a cocaine overdose; a month later, von Erich's son Kerry, around whom he had built his promotion, was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident (that later resulted in the secret amputation of Kerry's right foot). In a matter of weeks, von Erich's World Class Championship Wrestling promotion was drawing crowds of200 instead of 10,000just a few months earlier. Then, von Erich's Oklahoma partner Bill Watts invaded Dallas with some of von Erich's wrestlers. The two born-again wrestling promoters went at each other in court when von Erich sued Watts for cheating him over their lucrative Tulsa and Oklahoma City partnership (which had paid von Erich over $428,000 for 1982 through 1985). Von Erich also sued six wrestlers and valet Missy Hyatt (Melissa Hiatt) when they left his promotion to work for Watts. A few months later, von Erich's lucrative TV contract with KXTX-TV in Dallas blew up when von Erich claimed the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) cheated him out of $226,000 in syndication revenue; in response, CBN threatened to erase 263 *World Class Championship Wrestling* videotapes. Soon, von Erich was back in court fighting with his Christian brothers to save his dying promotion. At about this time, Gagne's former partner in the NWA's defunct St. Louis promotion and former NWA world champion Harley Race went to work for McMahon, joining past NWA world champions Jack Brisco and Dory and Terry Funk. *"Might as well - sooner or later, everybody's gonna be working for Vince,"* Harley snorted. When Harley left the NWA, the wrestling war seemed all but over.

There were other problems for McMahon's competitors, too. Jim Crockett's promotion stumbled when its *American Bash* tour of 14 cities in August 1986 fell far short of expected gates. Instead of generating the anticipated $8 million, Crockett grossed $1.6 million - compared to McMahon's *Wrestlemania* //that reportedly grossed about $19 million. Later, Crockett suffered booking complications when Magnum T. A. (Terry Wayne Allen), its top *babyface* and the man already selected to take the

NWA's world *strap* from Ric Flair, was seriously injured in an car accident. By the end of 1986, only *three* major wrestling promoters remained: McMahon, Crockett and Watts. When Crockett bought out Watts (reportedly for $4 million) in April1987, The Business was reduced to *two* major players and competitors - McMahon's WWF and Crockett's NWA. Then, Crockett acquired Eddie Graham's old Tampa NWA office, Championship Wrestling From Florida, Inc. The Florida promotion was nearly bankrupt, its annual income having dwindled from the $4 million range to virtually nothing in four short years. But with the Florida acquisition and the buyout of Watts' TV contracts, Crockett finally had enough good wrestlers with a large enough syndicated TV network to overtake McMahon. The wrestling world watched for Crockett to make his move on Vince, Jr. But it didn't happen. The Florida territory was *burned out* and Crockett's acquisition of the Watts promotion soured when Crockett's TV ratings tumbled.

Another important but unpublicized development inside The Business unfolded in spring 1987. Up in Connecticut, McMahon's vice president Jim Barnett attempted an internal powerplay that failed and backfired. After McMahon asked Barnett to resign his vice presidency and leave, Barnett went home, swallowed a lethal dose of pills and called a friend. An ambulance arrived in time to get Barnett to a hospital and he survived. Barnett's suicide attempt came a week before his 63rd birthday - just 2^ years after Eddie Graham shot himself in the head in Tampa. When Barnett recovered, he got himself hired by Jim Crockett to work behind the scenes on Crockett's TV network. But not even Barnett's reputed television genius was enough to turn the Crockett promotion around.

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As McMahon's WWF thundered throughout the country setting pro wrestling revenue records, one of the industry's *time honored traditions* did not change: wrestlers' share of the take. Although McMahon paid his wrestlers better than other promoters, McMahon's promotion was now making a lot more money than others. Still, McMahon's wrestlers seemed generally happy - until they counted their money for taxes or got injured

and took time to think about their situation. Which is what happened to James Janos, better known as Jesse "The Body" Ventura and later Minnesota Governor. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Jesse had wrestled for several promotions before he went to work for McMahon's WWF in spring 1984. At the time, Jesse thought McMahon's WWF was going to change wrestling's time- honored traditions, and he later talked about it. "All through your wrestling career, remember, you're an *independent contractor.* You're paying out an enormous amount in taxes. There's no pension, no health benefits. And the moment you're not making that draw, the promoters couldn't care less about you. *You're a piece of meat.* I knew guys that had worked hard for twenty years or more and still retired with nothing. Wrestling operated under some of the most unfair working conditions in the country. I don't know how they got away with it for so many years. The WWF was supposed to change things, but it hadn't turned out that way.

"There were a number of times in my career when wrestling went bad on me. There were dark patches in those years that were marked by backstabbing and betrayal . . . *I wasn't one of the real bad guys in the wrestling business: The promoters had that market cornered.* They'd tell you when to wrestle, where to wrestle, what moves to use, and whether you were going to win or lose, but at the same time they'd also call you an *independent contractor* so you'd have to pay self-employment tax. What's *independent* about that? It was a fraud, a lie. We were employees but we got no benefits. They had no loyalty to you, either. Once you stopped bringing in the crowds, you were out of there. They wouldn't give you a second thought." Jesse was especially outraged with the *Power of the Pencil,* arguing *when wrestlers are told to lose, they lose their marketing value,* all of which demonstrated a classic case of *employer-employee* relationship, not independent contractor.

"I had been rumbling quietly about forming a wrestler's union for awhile. One day I had met up with Gene Upshaw, the union rep for the NFL, in an elevator. Gene looked at me, and in that big deep voice of his said, 'You boys in wrestling need to *unionize*!' And I said, 'You're right, Gene, we do!' Ever since then, I had been talking quietly among the *boys.* They were all for it. All we had to do was wait for the right moment, which came pretty soon after that. It was spring of 1986. We were scheduled for the WWF's *Wrestlemania //* in Los Angeles. All the publicity had gone out

on it already. About two weeks before the event, I went into a dressing room full of wrestlers and said, ‘Boys, if there was ever a chance to organize, now is the time to do it. All of our faces are on the *Wrestlemania* publicity - the fans are expecting us. They couldn’t back out of the deal now. Now’s our chance.’ But a couple of the wrestlers said, ‘We need Hulk Hogan. We can’t do this without him.’ ‘No we don’t,’ I explained. ‘ Hogan’s scheduled to wrestle King Kong Bundy, and Bundy has publicity out on him already. If Bundy backs us, Hogan has to wrestle him. If we all stick together and simply tell Vince we’re refusing to wrestle unless we’re allowed to *unionize,* what are they going to be able to do? And if the other unions all back us up, who’s gonna turn the lights on in the building?’ Vince had invested millions in *Wrestlemania //.* We had him.

“But nobody wanted to be the one to risk it. They were all behind me until I started drawing *heat* for it. Then I was alone. I came home a few nights later, and as soon as I walked in the door the phone rang. It was Vince McMahon. I knew something big was going down because he’s not in the habit of calling his wrestlers at home for a chat. ‘ Ventura, what are you trying to pull? I heard you were trying to *unionize* pro wrestling.’ I thought to myself, ‘Who told him?’ But I’m not the type to back down from anything, so I said, ‘Yeah, I’m looking into it. Why shouldn’t I? This is not to fight you, Vince. This is about me and *all the other wrestlers* who have to pay four or five thousand a year for health care. If we’re in a union, we can buy it in bulk and save a lot of money.’ I went on to tell him all the reasons why *unionizing* would help us. But he argued and threatened, and we basically got nowhere. I told him, ‘Jeez, Vince. This is just like the movie *Norma Rae*.’” Years later, Jesse found out who told Vince McMahon about his attempt to *unionize* wrestlers - it was Terry Gene Bollea. Jesse added: “Fortunately for me, I soon had another option. I had just been signed to do the movie *Predator* and had appeared on the TV show *Hunter* before that. I was now eligible for my Screen Actors Guild card. I had my union. To this day, I keep my dues paid because that’s where I get my health and retirement benefits. Once my SAG card had kicked in, I told Vince, ‘Don’t worry. I’m not going to try to unionize anymore. I have my union card. If those guys are too gutless to do it, let them find their own way into a union’’

Another one of Vince McMahon's superstars who eventually got interested in wrestler treatment was Paul "Mr. Wonderful" Orndorff. Paul also came to wrestling from football, having played at the University of Tampa, where his teammates included Freddie Solomon and John Matuszak. He was drafted by the Kansas City Chiefs in 1973 and later signed with the New Orleans Saints and eventually played with the Jacksonville Sharks of the World Football League. Paul entered pro wrestling in 1976 after being trained by Hiro Matsuda in Eddie Graham's Tampa office of the NWA. Paul's athletic background, good looks and muscled body got him an immediate *push* in several territories and he was one of Georgia Championship's stars secretly signed by McMahon in 1983. After Hulk Hogan was given the WWF world *strap* in early 1984, Paul was brought in as the arrogant *heel* opponent to work a *program* with Hogan.

In the first *Wrestlemania*, Paul and Roddy Piper lost the main event to Hogan and actor Mr. T., but Paul was unhappy that his share of the $6 million plus gate was $20,000 - about half of what he was promised. When Paul got an outside offer to film a TV commercial for Absorbine Jr. for $50,000, McMahon decided that Paul's share should be $7,500; at least he got to do it, unlike wrestler Wendi Richter who was invited to do a cameo appearance on *Love Boat* for $25,000 and had the deal killed when McMahon insisted Hulk Hogan be used instead of Wendi. But Paul went along to get along and soon *turned babyface* to feud with Roddy Piper and Bob Orton, Jr. In a matter of months, he became a WWF headliner and for awhile, made more money than he had seen in pro wrestling. At five feet eleven and 230, Paul was not large as pro wrestlers go, but with each additional year in the WWF his muscle mass and weight increased. With his chiseled physique and icy blue eyes, Paul looked like wrestling's stud and he got *heat.* A few months later, Paul was *turned heel* for another *program* with Hogan and his feud with Hogan *popped* in every major city. A cage match with Hogan on NBC-TV's *Saturday Night Main Event* brought higher TV ratings (10.6 with a 29% share) than the show ever produced; another match with Hogan in Toronto's Exhibition Stadium set an indoor attendance record of 69,300. Paul was given some very large *payoffs*, making as much as $20,000 some weeks. Then, Paul's career took an

unexpected turn in late 1986 when doctors discovered a series of dead nerves in his left arm, which explained why his arm had been recently hanging uselessly at his side. Although doctors told Paul to quit wrestling, he continued; but when he stopped hard weight work, there was a predictable change in his physique and he started missing matches, running up a string of no-shows. One insider observed, " His contacts in Allentown could only do so much." Paul finally quit the WWF after working a *program* with Ultimate Warrior (Jim Hellwig) who was *green* and *stiff*, not the kind of guy who can be counted on to protect an opponent's aching body. Later, Paul opened a chain of bowling alleys in the south.

Three months after Paul retired from wrestling, I spoke with him at the suggestion of a mutual acquaintance, Mike Kenn of the Atlanta Falcons and an energetic figure in the National Football League Players' Association. When I asked Paul how he felt now about a wrestlers' union, he lighted up: "*The guys are getting raped. And the guys need a union now more than they ever did. But they can't jeopardize their careers unless it's a legitimate thing"* he said. "The *payoffs* were good for awhile when Vince started in 1984 and 1985, but now they've tightened up. *And there's no medical and no pension. The guys will never get what they want. Vince is making about $200 million a year* and Hogan is just one of the *boys*, but he's making the top buck. For the rest, there still are no guarantees - except $50 for each TV show. They're given something from the residuals on merchandise revenue, but it's very small," he said.

Then he added this: " I beat the system. I came in, had my matches and left. I got my money, invested it and got out. But I bucked the system. *If I hadn't bucked 'em, I'd have the belt by now,"* he said. Paul seemed to think he was next in line after Hulk Hogan to get the WWF's world championship *strap*, and I didn't ask if it had been promised. A few months later, McMahon switched the WWF's championship *strap* that Paul expected to someday wear. The new champion was another undrafted, nonunion, former ballplayer from my wrestling past. The WWF's new champ was the kid introduced to me on that winter night in 1974 by his daddy who was so proud that his son played minor league baseball. Formerly Randy Poffo, Macho Man Randy Savage was the guy whose father and brother had fought the wrestling establishment for many years and had been a target of a commissioned *stretching.* The onetime wrestling *outlaw* had a come a

long way since we all crammed into that old beat up Volkswagen van that roamed the backroads of Kentucky.

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By 1987, Vince McMahon had replaced the NWA's wrestling monopoly with his own. Looking at the wrestling business from his White Sox offices in Chicago, Eddie Einhorn said, "McMahon is well organized and has done a very good job. It's going to be pretty hard to compete with him. *He just did what anyone could have done a long time ago who had the balls and the dough. And the base* - see, he had the base, which was the New York territory which was doing very well anyway. I give him a lot of credit. These other guys were not businessmen equipped to do it. Crockett was the only guy, but he's operating out of a very small area, and he couldn't do it," Einhorn said.

Einhorn's prediction came to pass in the spring of 1988 when Crockett borrowed heavily to avoid closing his promotion down. At about this time, one of Crockett's well connected deputies called an old friend at One CNN Center in Atlanta. It was a cordial conversation between Jim Barnett and Ted Turner, two powerful men whose institutions (the NWA and WTBS) had enjoyed a long and successful history together. Barnett asked Turner if he was interested in buying all or some of Crockett's promotion that now constituted what was left of the NWA, but which provided Turner's WTBS with four hours of programming and advertising revenue each week. Turner said he'd like to talk further, and Barnett arranged a meeting between Turner and Crockett to discuss a deal. Jim Barnett's personal relationship with Ted Turner ("I only deal with prime ministers, dictators and kings") was a godsend for Crockett. But Turner's accountants dictated the terms of the sale: after Crockett settled his debts, Turner would buy 65% controlling interest. And, Turner's bean counters said, the market value of Crockett's 53 year-old promotion had been assessed at about $15 million. The deal was closed six months later, after the Crocketts and Jim Barnett got Turner Broadcasting to promise them jobs. So Ted Turner bought the old NWA for about $9 million; by contrast, McMahon's WWF was estimated to be worth ten times that - more than $100 million at the time.

A wholly unexpected wrestling bombshell exploded in October 1988 when *Forbes* magazine, for the first time in its publishing history, profiled the economics of pro wrestling. *Forbes* focused on McMahon's WWF and sketched its revenue sources and marketing empire. The *Forbes* analysis, assembled without McMahon's cooperation, hit the nation's wrestlers hard: "The WWF sold $80 million worth of tickets to live wrestling shows last year. Add that to merchandise sold at the shows, advertising sales on WWF television programs, videos and other sources of revenue, and *you have a company grossing $145 million. Retail sales of such things as wrestling lunch boxes and action figures account for another $170 million; the 3% licensing fee that the WWF collects on this is just gravy to the bottom line,'* wrote *Forbes.* Around the county, touring wrestlers used airport layovers and empty afternoons to search out magazine stands for a copy of the most revealing exposé in wrestling history. Their suspicions were confirmed: *"Vince McMahon is now easily a centimillionaire - the WWF alone is worth some $100 million*," said *Forbes.*

Wrestling economics had always been hidden from view and although the industry's attorneys and accountants were privy to the enormous take, wrestlers didn't *know* the numbers until now. *Pro wrestling's best kept secret - its gross national product - was finally out of the closet.* Even muscle-headed wrestlers didn't need much time to do additional figuring to estimate the rest of pro wrestling's revenue now produced by arena gates, pay-per-view TV, syndicated and cable TV advertising and spin-off merchandising. Without one MBA degree among them, wrestlers deduced the most important line item in pro wrestling's accounting spreadsheets - *the incredibly low business costs.* As a business, the wrestling industry's only operating expenses were monies paid for arena rentals, TV production and talent - wrestler compensation. With some quick calculations, wrestlers concluded that talent compensation could not possibly constitute more than 15% of wrestling's gross. If there was ever a point in pro wrestling history when *wrestlers should have realized they were the industry's genuine marks,* it was now.

Although *Forbes* had focused only on Vince McMahon's wrestling company, its analysis of wrestling economics explained why Ted Turner put a few million of his billions into The Business; there were several reasons, but they all had dollar signs in front of them. And in fact, Ted Turner had already been in The Business for 17 years, ever since he asked Ann Gunkel to persuade her husband Ray to put his Atlanta wrestling show on Turner's tiny independent UHF station with poor reception in 1971. More than anybody, Ted Turner realized how good wrestling had been for his broadcasting empire, bringing him his first 100,000 audience in Atlanta, his highest ratings on TBS cable and the station's most profitable program even when ratings were down. Now, Turner's interest in owning the old NWA was fueled by the prospect of tapping the wrestling industry's newest revenue sources - pay-per- view events and merchandising. There was no question about it: Ted Turner's acquisition of the NWA came as very bad news to Vince McMahon, and many in The Business expected Turner to put an end to McMahon's wrestling takeover. After all, Turner's personal wealth and media industry power far exceeded McMahon's.

Those who put their money on Ted Turner underestimated Vince McMahon's predatory business philosophy and appetite for tough, hard-nosed, balls-to-the-wall promotional practice. By now, McMahon's scorched-earth tactics were legendary but none of his rough powerplays compared with his obnoxious sabotage of a struggling competitor's pay-per-view supercard in December 1988. The struggling competitor was Verne Gagne's old Minneapolis-based AWA promotion, now on its last legs. Gagne's AWA had already been eliminated by McMahon's WWF as serious competition in Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and Canada, and had stopped promoting regular arena shows on the circuit it previously *owned.* Now, Gagne restricted his activity to taping TV wrestling for ESPN-TV. As a last gasp and probable farewell to The Business, Gagne joined forces with Memphis promoters Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler (who had recently acquired controlling interest of von Erich's World Class Wrestling promotion in Dallas) to stage *Super Clash ///* in Chicago featuring a world

title unification match between World Class champion Kerry von Erich and AWA champion Jerry Lawler. Inside The Business, nobody expected Gagne to break even, especially when both advance arena ticket sales and pay-per-view orders confirmed the show's likely disastrous outcome.

Nonetheless, a week before Gagne's Chicago pay-per-view show, McMahon's WWF petitioned the Illinois Athletic Commission to bar Kerry von Erich from wrestling on Gagne's show, thereby sabotaging the main event between von Erich and Lawler. McMahon's lawyers told the Illinois Commission that Kerry von Erich should not be licensed *because /Illinois law prohibited wrestlers with artificial limbs!* Perplexed, the Illinois Commission asked what this had to do with Kerry von Erich, and WWF officials told one of wrestling's remaining secrets: the man inside one of the most perfect physiques in all of pro wrestling was actually handicapped - *the Modern Day Warrior had no) right foot!* Kerry's terrible secret was well kept until three weeks earlier when he accidentally lost his boot during a match in Las Vegas. Fortunately, only 1,500 fans saw Kerry's Vegas post-prosthetic debut against Col. Ed DeBeers (William Edward Wiskoski) that progressed according to plan for the first ten minutes, at which point the script went awry. While scuffling outside the ring, Kerry leaped onto the ring apron to beat the referee's count. When Kerry lunged, DeBeers grabbed his right leg by the boot. Suddenly, Kerry's boot slipped off, revealing a white athletic sock pulled snugly over a stump and prosthesis, not a foot. Grabbing his boot from DeBeers, Kerry went into a terrorized rage, scrambling under the ring to rehoof his amputated ankle. A dozen ringsiders sat silently in horror, stunned by what they'd seen. One snapped a photograph.

With or without Kerry's foot, Gagne's show was a bust: it attracted a small arena crowd and a modest pay-per-view audience of only 44,000 orders. At least Kerry's terrible secret was not revealed publicly, thanks to the Illinois Commission that didn't want publicity or more pressure from its main source of income, Vince McMahon's WWF. Later pressed to explain itself, a WWF spokesman said their intent had *not been* to sabotage the Chicago wrestling show or ruin Kerry's wrestling career; instead, he said, the WWF wanted to force the Illinois Commission to loosen its control over wrestling and hence its taxing authority by acknowledging that wrestling was entertainment, not sport. But the WWF's explanation was suspect:

Illinois *already classified pro wrestling as an exhibition.* When the Illinois Commission ignored McMahon's objections to licensing footless Kerry von Erich, the WWF did not press its mean-spirited complaint. It had weightier matters to deal with. And they were emanating from Atlanta, new home of the NWA. Vince McMahon should have heard it coming over his shoulder from the southeast: *"Lead or follow or get out of the way!"* Now owner of the NWA, an agitated Ted Turner was about to unleash his first powerplay. And it wouldn't be subtle.

Hardball business tactics were nothing new to Turner, either. When TBS brass scheduled its own pay-per-view show for February 1989, McMahon retaliated by having USA-TV cable schedule a three-hour *live* show with Hulk Hogan from Madison Square Garden to run head-to- head with Turner's pay-TV time slot. In response to McMahon's retaliation, Turner ordered his own NWA pay-per-view show to run head-to-head with McMahon's *Wrestlemania V.* Same old wrestling business tactics, except something was different this time: when the nation's cable TV operators were forced to choose between carrying McMahon's successful *Wrestlemania* or the untried Turner NWA show, most of them sided with Turner - because, unknown to the public, TBS was partially owned by a consortium of multi-system cable operators; many local cable operators were actually *partners* with Ted Turner. With Turner's clout in the cable-TV industry, he could have forced *Wrestlemania* off pay-TV but his attorneys advised against it, fearing *antitrust exposure* and a McMahon lawsuit. In the end, Turner elected not to squeeze McMahon off cable-TV, and *Wrestlemania* Vunfolded as planned in early April 1989. Everybody who was supposed to win, did.

But the wrestling-war-to-end-all-wrestling wars was underway. One Turner Broadcasting insider said, "We didn't ask for this war and we didn't want it, but the war is definitely on!" In spring 1989, Ted Turner locked horns with Vince McMahon in what most expected to be an apocalyptic *shoot* with brains, combative arrogance and raw *heel* ego evenly distributed on the battlefield. The stage was now set for the longest, bloodiest wrestling war in history. And pro wrestling's worst scandal.

Chapter 11

S C A N D A L I S T H E M A I N E V E N T

PRO WRESTLING'S SCANDAL-plagued 1990s began unnoticed a few years before when the FBI's Hawaii bureau quietly brought recording equipment to Kengo's Restaurant on Kapiolani Boulevard in Honolulu on October 24, 1988. The FBI was investigating another criminal complaint against The Business - that a local NWA office was involved in extortion and death threats against an NWA *outlaw* promoter. The Hawaiian *outlaw,* a man named John Wakayama, wanted to promote wrestling on the Islands in competition with World Pacific Wrestling Association, operated by Lia Maivia (grandmother of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson), Lars Anderson (Larry Heineimi) and Ati So'o. The NWA group thought it *owned* pro wrestling on the Islands and was determined to stop him.

After Wakayama booked Terry and Dory Funk, Stan Hansen, Terry Gordy and others for a three-night tour of the Islands and a final show in Honolulu, Maivia and Heineimi confronted Wakayama with several demands - that he pay them a $5,000 *tribute* (kickback), rent their wrestling ring for $1,000, buy three TV spots on their Saturday morning wrestling TV show and hire at least two of their wrestlers. When Wakayama refused to meet their demands, Lia Maivia threatened Wakayama: *"People die in this business,"* she promised. The next day, her partner So'o left a recorded message on Wakayama's answering machine that threatened the lives of Wakayama's children if he didn't cooperate. After the death threats, Wakayama went to the FBI for help and they agreed to record his next meeting with the NWA group. The resulting electronic surveillance captured the extortion and death threat: wearing a wire, Wakayama asked Maivia and Heineimi what he could do to save himself and his children, and the Rock's grandmother Lia Maivia replied, "PAY!" Then she added this - she said her partner Ati So'o was *"the kind of person who goes 'bang,g, bang,'"* as she made shooting gestures. The meeting ended when Wakayama paid Maivia $1,800 in FBI-provided cash and promised another

$3,200 the next day. Maivia and Heineimi were arrested while leaving the restaurant and So'o was arrested later that night.

When the Justice Department charged the three NWA Hawaii promoters with conspiracy to obstruct interstate commerce by extortion and threat of physical violence, the case made headlines in Honolulu and it interested me for several reasons. For one thing, the allegations were familiar - consistent with what else was known about the NWA's long history of criminal conduct, as the Justice Department already knew. Secondly, I knew one of the defendants in the case, Lars Anderson (Larry Heineimi) - I had wrestled him during the 1970s when we both worked for Eddie Einhorn, and I had hired him to wrestle for our IWL's second Omni show in Atlanta. I was also interested in the case because of my indirect connection with Lia Maivia through her dead husband, the NWA's former Hawaii wrestling promoter Peter Maivia who helped *kill* our Samoan shows many years earlier. Finally, Justice Department interest in the wrestling business always interested me, and this case was serious; if convicted, Larry and Peter Maivia's widow (and Ati So'o) faced 20-year prison terms.

The Hawaii extortion and racketeering case was heard by a jury in federal court and it consumed two months during which experts argued about whose voice left the death threats recorded by Wakayama's answering machine. Jury deliberations took another two weeks but in the end, jurors couldn't decide whether the $5,000 *tribute* was extortion or a *booking fee* nor could they determine whether the death threat on Wakayama's answering machine matched the voice of So'o or somebody else. In the end, all defendants were acquitted but with a dark cloud hanging over the verdict: it was later revealed that one of the jurors was an acquaintance of the Maivia family and should not have served on the jury. When news of the trial verdict reached the mainland, wrestling insiders joked about it, saying it was just more proof that the Justice Department was still populated by *marks* and *everything's* still *a work.*

Months later in 1991, after its long, nervous history of potential public relations nightmares, pro wrestling finally woke up to one it couldn't

control. This time, the damaging publicity wasn't focused on extortion or death threats or blacklisting or bribes to athletic commissions, TV stations or arenas. This time, the PR nightmare was the revelation that the magnificent physiques of pro wrestling's superstars had been chemically induced. As suspected by many who watched wrestling's renaissance in the mid-1980s, those massively muscular bodies had been artificially bloated to spectacular proportions by anabolic steroids. *Wrestling's beautiful bodies were fake, too!*

As in prior wrestling scandals, the industry worked frantically to control the spin on negative fallout. But after the Justice Department indicted a *wrestlers' pharmacist* in June 1991 for selling steroids to wrestlers (and promoter Vince McMahon), the industry was hit with the most damning publicity in its memory. This chapter in pro wrestling's sorry history began in the mid-1980s after the box office success of Hulk Hogan and the Road Warriors proved to other wrestlers that use *of juice* - anabolic steroids by injection - produced a promotional *push* from *bookers.* Learning from the *boys* who achieved wrestling stardom, other wrestlers concluded they would need chemical help to make it big. And of all wrestling promotions in the mid-1980s, Vince McMahon's WWF was most obviously oriented toward heavily muscled wrestlers. As a result, most WWF wrestlers not only pumped iron but injected steroids after they shared information about a convenient and inexpensive source - a Pennsylvania Athletic Commission-appointed doctor in Allentown.

Later, one ring veteran said, "All the wrestlers knew if they wanted drugs, this was the place [the WWF] to wrestle." Former WWF champion Bruno Sammartino said, "When I came back to the WWF as a TV announcer in 1984, it was scary. I used to go to the men's room between TV tapings and I'd see hundreds of hypodermic needles lying around." Although steroid use was not officially a condition of employment, it amounted to that. One insider said, "The bottom line is how can you get big, stay big and how can you wrestle six nights a week - without steroids? You don't have to be very smart to see that the bigger guys get all the *pushes* and the little guys don't. You can figure it out. You don't need to be a brain surgeon. Look at the WWF boss - he's a body freak, too. He's big, works out every day. Yes, steroid use is widespread; you'd be surprised. Most of them are on steroids. And it may have tragic consequences." At

about this time, former NWA wrestling champion Terry Funk said, "*McMahon has made a lot of guys very rich, but he may also be taking years off their lives'"*

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Pro wrestling's drug problem wasn't limited to steroids and some earlier drug incidents had attracted attention. One of these was the cocaine overdose of Texas wrestler Gino Hernandez (Charles Wolfe) who was found dead in 1986; a year later, wrestlers Hacksaw Jim Duggan and Iron Sheik were caught with small amounts of marihuana and cocaine during a police vehicle stop in New Jersey; their arrest made the newspapers because the two of them were then feuding with each other in a WWF *program.* After embarrassing publicity, both were terminated by Vince McMahon but they later returned to WWF wrestling at about the time McMahon began a drug-testing program of sorts, placing those grapplers with unclean urine on probation. The well publicized WWF drug testing program was greeted with cynicism inside locker rooms. Many wrestlers viewed drug tests as another wrestling publicity *gimmick*, something to hype the industry's *babyface* imagery and its claim to wholesome, family entertainment. Some wrestling veterans saw a darker purpose. As industry insider Ray Whebbe said, "I don't think they use urinalysis to help people into treatment. */ think they use it to find out who's in trouble - who's in trouble*

in life, who's using drugs? Then they can control them more. They can say, 'Look, you piece of shit:, you don't get a raise! You're a drug addict!' They fuck with the guy that way. If they want to fire them, they'll hide behind the drug test. Otherwise, they use it as a measure of control." Whatever its real purpose, many wrestlers regarded drug testing as a joke. At the time, one locker room wisecrack was: *"If they find cocaine, you're suspended - and if they DON'T find steroids, you're suspended!"*

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Wrestling's steroid secret leaked to the public one night in early 1990 when former WWF champion Superstar Billy Graham (Wayne Coleman) lay crippled in pain at a Los Angeles hospital. Billy Graham got into wrestling in 1969, after having placed fifth in a Mr. World bodybuilding contest. He was not much of a wrestler but his massively muscularity attracted a lot of attention inside the industry; Superstar Graham was one of wrestling's first steroid performers, the Hulk Hogan prototype who invented Hogan's TV interview line about having *23- inch pythons.* But Billy's wrestling career was riddled with frequent leaves of absence, which fueled locker room talk about why he suddenly lost his hair and dropped weight and took so many leaves of absence for surgery. After a hip replacement in 1987, he quit the ring to perform as a manager. But in time, his difficulty in walking precluded even the managerial role.

By February 1990, Billy Graham was 47 and hospitalized for his seventh reconstructive bone surgery. As he lay in his hospital bed one night before surgery, he watched TV promos for NBC-TV's *Main Event* wrestling show that featured a match between two of wrestling's alleged steroid kings, Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage. The promos angered Billy and he telephoned KNBC-TV in Los Angeles, asking to speak with sportscaster Fred Rogan. Billy told Rogan he wanted to talk about steroids in wrestling and a taped interview with Billy aired that evening: "I was the champion of the World Wrestling Federation - the most colorful man in the sport, and I threw it out the window. It's not worth it, man, when you're lying in a hospital cut open from end to end and you're on morphine and Demerol because of the pain, and you know you'll never walk like a normal man again." Billy said he destroyed his career by injecting steroids and now suffered from disintegration of bone joints, a side effect of *The Juice.* "All you have to do is look at me and ask yourself is this the way you want to end up?" he said. Superstar Billy Graham's hospital confession on KNBC-TV was a prologue to the biggest mainstream news story about The Business in 40 years.

A month later, FBI agents raided the offices of Dr. George Thomas Zahorian III, an osteopath known around Allentown, Pennsylvania as a specialist in male impotence and infertility. Dr. Zahorian had been expecting trouble with the Justice Department, having been tipped off earlier to its investigation by one of Vince McMahon's lieutenants, Pat Patterson (Pierre Clemont), and had already moved his wrestler files out of his clinic to a lawyer's office. At the time of the raid, FBI agents found Zahorian in a back room, shredding Federal Express receipts for steroids recently sent to wrestlers Rowdy Roddy Piper (Roderick Toombs) and Mike Rotundo. Later, the Justice Department subpoenaed other Zahorian shipping records which showed he sold steroids and other drugs to 43 pro wrestlers, 37 of whom were employed by McMahon's WWF when deliveries were made. Records also showed Zahorian sold drugs to many wrestlers without prescriptions.

The illegal steroid-trafficking evidence against Dr. Zahorian was strong. Although steroid use was not at the time illegal, distributing steroids for nonmedical purposes *was* illegal. To prove its case against Zahorian, Government prosecutors subpoenaed five of Zahorian's better known clients - Hulk Hogan, Roddy Piper, Brian Blair, Dan Spivey and Rick Martel - to testify that Zahorian sold them steroids for nonmedical purposes. Except for Hulk Hogan, all subpoenaed wrestlers cooperated with the Justice Department. In Hogan's case, his attorney Jerry McDevitt worked frantically to contain damaging revelations about the WWF's famous wrestler, inside whose swollen skin lived its most lucrative asset. As an officer of the court committed to the search for truth, McDevitt's ironic assignment was to save the WWF's All-American hero (who routinely told American schoolchildren to "Take your vitamins, do your training and say your prayers") from becoming caught up in his own hypocrisy about chemical shortcuts. In a *sealed* (secret) pretrial maneuver, McDevitt asked the judge to excuse his famous client from testifying because "having to admit to steroid use would damage his public image." Although the secret legal gambit to get Hogan off the witness stand was never disclosed officially, it nonetheless made headlines in *USA Today* and *The New York Times* and was noted by ABC-TV's *Evening News*, *Entertainment Tonight* and dozens of local TV and radio newscasts around the country, especially when Judge William Caldwell went along with the request to excuse Hogan from testifying.

Although McMahon's legal braintrust got Hogan *off* the witness stand, the four other subpoenaed wrestlers were not excused, and McMahon's attorneys worried about what they might reveal under oath. The first wrestler to testify against Zahorian was former University of Georgia footballer Dan Spivey, who said Zahorian sent him Deca-Durabolin (Deca), Anavar, Anadrol, testosterone and 100 to 200 tablets of Valium and Halcion; Spivey confirmed "there were lines [of wrestlers] waiting to see him [Zahorian]" and Dr. Zahorian never administered physical exams. Next to testify was Rowdy Roddy Piper, who said Zahorian sold him Deca, Anavar, Stanozolol (Winstrol) and Halcion. Wrestler Brian Blair testified Zahorian sold him Anavar, Deca and testosterone, although Zahorian never examined him or took a medical history. Rick Martel said he purchased Deca, Anavar and testosterone from Zahorian and also confirmed that Zahorian never took his medical history nor examined him.

After the four wrestlers testified, Zahorian took the witness stand in his own defense and tried to paint a picture of his steroid trafficking as an act of compassion intended to prevent greater harm. Zahorian told the jury that after becoming athletic commission doctor for Pennsylvania in 1978, "I could not believe that I was sitting in an exam room or sitting at the ring of individuals that I had admired for years at home and examining these men and being able to talk to them and actually know that they were human beings . . . [who] opened up their hearts to me.

"About what?" Zahorian was asked.

"They would come in with some of the medications that they were taking," Zahorian replied.

"Such as?" he was asked.

"The anabolic steroids. One man came in to me, showed me a bottle. 'Doc, can you get this for me?' I looked at the bottle and read the label. I said, 'What's that label say?' *FOR VETERINARIAN USE* . . . I said, 'Can you read?' He says, 'No.' [I said to him,] 'Do you know that said for veterinarian use? Where did you get that?' . . . I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I wanted to educate them," he said.

Zahorian admitted selling steroids to wrestlers (and Vince McMahon), and confirmed one of his clients was Hulk Hogan. But Zahorian insisted he'd taken Hogan from serious abuse of steroids to getting off them.

Zahorian testified: “This man [Hulk Hogan] has not taken any type of anabolic steroids to the best of my knowledge for the past two or three years.”

“Because of you?” Zahorian’s attorney asked.

“Yes, sir . . . [And] his love of God, his children, his family,” replied Zahorian.

A final trial witness was the crippled Superstar Billy Graham, the guy who brought wrestling’s steroid problem to public attention in 1990. Graham admitted heavy steroid use dating back to 1965 but disputed Zahorian’s claim that no wrestlers suffered side effects. “They’ve ruined my life, they’ve ruined my wrestling career, they’ve made me a cripple. I’ll never be a normal man again. I cannot have children, and that’s a heavy price to pay, to not have a family,” Graham said.

After closing arguments by the attorneys, the jury deliberated for three hours before finding Dr. Zahorian guilty of 12 counts of illegally distributing steroids and other controlled substances and was sentenced to prison for three years. It was a big victory for the Justice Department, and I hope they celebrated because it was the first time they nailed The Business since 1956.

While Dr. George Thomas Zahorian III was manacled and hauled off to jail, Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon took their punishment in brutal publicity following Zahorian’s imprisonment. The negative backlash was ignited by a *Sports Illustrated* cover story entitled “I LIED” on former NFLer Lyle Alzado who was slowly dying from an inoperable brain tumor caused by years of steroid abuse. In a sidebar to the Alzado story entitled “The Sham Is a Sham,” *S-I* questioned the fairness of excusing Hulk Hogan from testifying in the Zahorian trial because of ““*private and personal matters that should be protected” S-I* opined: “It wasn’t immediately clear why Hogan’s privacy was protected when other wrestlers had to testify as government witnesses.” Then Bruno Sammartino jumped on Hogan, telling one newspaper: “Here is a guy who is to me the phoniest guy in the history

of the sport. Here is a guy who talks about saying your prayers-I doubt if he's ever even seen the inside of a church - and eating your vitamins. We all *know* what kind of vitamins he's been on." And a *New York Times'* columnist wrote: " The Hulkster, more of an American hero than Alzado, never appeared at Zahorian's trial, although the defendant said he sold him steroids and helped him kick the drug. The judge quashed a subpoena compelling Hogan to testify and dropped the charge against Zahorian that pertained to Hogan because of 'private and personal matters that should be protected.' *Other than the wrestling industry, it was not clear what needed to be protected."* And *New York Post* columnist Phil Mushnick blasted sportscasters Bob Costas, Warner Wolf, Spencer Christian and George Michael who gave pro wrestling heavy coverage in the mid-1980s but "ran like hell" from the Zahorian story. Mushnick also criticized McMahon's silent partner Dick Ebersol at NBC-Sports, noting NBC- TV was the only broadcast network that didn't cover the Zahorian steroid story on its newscasts - the same network that had aired McMahon's *Saturday Night Main Event* didn't touch wrestling's biggest story of the year.

The negative PR fallout from the Zahorian trial didn't stop there: Cornell University Medical College steroid expert Dr. Gary Wadler wrote an op-ed piece saying, "What I can't understand is *why there was so little* [media] *attention to the wrestling trial . . . This is an industry that's pitched to kids, that comes into homes as cartoons and children's TV, that makes an enormous amount of money in toy stores selling itself as a pantheon of American heroes." USA Today* even criticized *S-I* for running a Hulk Hogan deodorant advertisement on the inside back cover of the same issue with Alzado's "I LIED" story on the cover. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* editorialized, "By stressing muscle size and definition over old-fashioned grappling skill, the major promoter of professional wrestling may have encouraged rampant abuse of anabolic steroids and human growth hormones." The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* Mark Madden wrote: "Blaming the promoters is not the answer, but blaming THE promoter is. *If any one man, group or entity can be blamed for the steroid boom in professional wrestling, it is Vincent K. McMahon."* And one of McMahon's former wrestlers added this: *"He doesn't care if you shove cryptonite up your ass, as long as you gain the weight. But he knows there's only one way to get there.'* I believe Vince McMahon should have been the man convicted last

week and, *in about twenty years, when ex-WWF wrestlers are dropping like flies, you can add another charge to that list*"

In the middle of a growing media blitzkrieg, McMahon's WWF headquarters released a press notice describing itself as "a responsible leader in family sports entertainment" with "the *most comprehensive* and enforced drug program in all of professional sports." A week later, McMahon staged a press conference to talk about his new steroid testing program and *do a job* - sacrificing himself for the sake of Hulk Hogan and his company, McMahon confirmed his own steroid use. But reporters were not interested in McMahon's steroid confession; they wanted to know more about McMahon's wrestlers, especially Hogan. After McMahon denied telling wrestlers to get bigger and disputed the claim that steroid use caused health problems, he announced that Hulk Hogan would appear on that evening's *Arsenio Hall TV* show to set the record straight. As news of Hogan's immanent appearance on *Arsenio* spread across the country that afternoon, it was generally expected that the Hulkster would finally come clean with a confession and apology on national TV.

What happened - or didn't happen - on *Arsenio* later that night badly damaged the credibility of both Terry Gene Bollea and Vince McMahon, Jr. As *Arsenio* opened, Hogan flexed one of his *23-inch pythons* from behind a curtain before sauntering onstage to hearty applause. Then Hulk moved quickly to his scripted defense: "Sometimes people read the paper and get misinformed. Basically, I was one of the patients of this doctor and then later down the line he got into all of these other things. But a federal judge basically said, 'Hulk Hogan, you don't have to testify. This trial has nothing to do with you.' When my name got thrown into the ringer, it became the Hulk Hogan trial and they didn't direct the focus on what this thing was all about . . . and it hurt me and it hurt my family. It put a dark cloud over everything that I believe in," said Hogan with his sincerest wide-eyed *babyface.* Sitting next to him, Arsenio Hall's jaw dropped, as if he were expecting a different story. Arsenio tried to turn off Hogan's defensive monologue that stonewalled the question: "Now wait, I read the paper, Hulk. You're not straightening me out, Hulk!" said Arsenio.

Raising his voice, Hogan continued. "The paper don't mean nothun' man. Listen to Hulk Hogan. First off, what I am is what I am. I am a real American. I love my family. I love my god. I love all of the people that

believe in me. And basically, this isn't a Lyle Alzado story you're going to hear out here . . . I trained 20 years, two hours a day to look like I do. But there's two things I'm not. I'm not a steroid abuser and I do not use steroids."

Then Hogan invoked the *Bosworth Defense* - that he used steroids, but only to treat an injury - and he moved quickly to his changed *finish:* "This is the '90s, the era of physical fitness. Stay away from those type of drugs . . . I have a wife and two kids, and I don't want to miss one second or do anything that will take a second away from my life to be with my wife and kids . . . *Hulk Hogan and the WWF, we are a bunch of leaders, not a bunch of followers. But you cannot use this stuff and get away with it. Number one, it will kill ya. Number two, you're gonna get busted"*

How well did Hogan *sell* his steroid script? Afterward, *Arsenio's* producers said they were surprised *and* enraged by Hogan's performance, having been led to expect a confession. When former wrestler and future governor Jesse Ventura was asked his reaction to Hogan's *Arsenio* performance, he said, *"I find it quite humorous when people say they've never used them. Don't insult my intelligence and don't insult others' intelligence. Some people aren't as stupid as some people think . . . some people need to come clean and be honest about it"* During the week after Hogan's controversial performance on *Arsenio,* McMahon's WWF wrestlers were instructed to *not* carry steroids in their luggage or on their person at airports because drug searches were expected. A few nights later at a WWF TV taping in Portland Maine, McMahon told his wrestlers to get off *The Juice* immediately because if a major name were to be caught with steroids now, it would cause a PR nightmare for the company. He told them to expect the WWF to begin steroid testing during August or early September. But the sincerity of the WWF's stance on steroids was challenged by the *New York Post's* Phil Mushnick: "If you believe that the steroid-swollen World Wrestling Federation is embarking on a genuine campaign to clean up its 'wholesome family entertainment' act, you're just the fool the WWF's counting on."

A few weeks after Hulk Hogan double-crossed *Arsenio,* The Business shifted attention to one of its occasional political problems - the periodic reconsideration of state regulation of pro wrestling by athletic commissions. This time, the unexpected problem popped up in Florida, where the state legislature was reviewing the wisdom of wrestling regulation in public hearings and The Business faced two obstacles: first, longtime Florida promoter Eddie Graham was no longer around to use his political clout and put an end to regulation talk, as he had done years before; second, the timing of Florida's reconsideration was unfortunate for The Business since it came at the very time that wrestling's steroid controversy was still in public view. The Business worried what Florida politicians might do, especially if the steroid scandal became the main event during legislative hearings. And it did.

One of the Florida hearings' main witnesses was middle-aged Mary Lou Gantner, mother of a dead wrestler who had committed suicide at the age of 30, and she confronted the Florida pols face-to-face with a teary account of her son's experience with steroids and The Business. Mary revealed that her son Ed "The Bull" Gantner began using steroids in 1976 as a high school junior, and after his weight increased from 185 to 225, was given a football scholarship by the University of Tennessee and later, the University of Central Florida where he was a starter for three seasons. After college, he played football for three years with the USFL, two years for the Jacksonville Bulls and another year with the Tampa Bay Bandits, where he was a teammate of wrestler Lex Luger (Larry Pfohl). By then, Ed was a heavy steroid user and he launched a short career in pro wrestling in 1985 with his friend Luger. Over the next two years, after Ed increased steroid use and experimented with primate hormones, his weight increased from 260 to 293. By now, Crockett Promotions promised Ed a major *push*, but Ed developed pneumonia and other medical problems when one of his kidneys failed, apparently due to years of steroid use and his wrestling career was suddenly finished. Although Ed underwent six surgeries in early 1988, he was still obsessed with his physique and size; after his second kidney failed, Ed was given a kidney transplant by his older sister. But when he felt better, he resumed steroid use; when his health failed again, he returned home to live with his mother. Near the end of his life, Ed told his mother, "Mom, if I ever had a son, I would never let him play football. He

would have to take steroids to compete." Then, Ed Gantner shot himself through the heart in his mother's kitchen on New Year's Eve.

Fighting through tears, Mary Gantner told Florida legislators: "I *feel that Ed's script was written in steroids and iron, and shaped by a culture's insane adoration for armchair violence. How can a responsible society allow for the trashing of the lives of our young people's minds and sit by indifferently and call it entertainment?* The grieving mother's account of a dead son's ambition to become a pro wrestler seemed to move the legislative audience. My old friend Bob Roop also appeared at the Florida hearing, endorsing a state wrestling commission. But a few weeks later, the Florida legislative committee voted to *not* regulate pro wrestling. When reporters asked why, one committee member revealed the vote had been heavily lobbied. By who? he was asked. By the wrestling promoters, he said. Later, wrestling insiders confirmed the heavy lifting in Florida was done by my old wrestling buddy Jerry Brisco of Tampa, still working for Vince McMahon. Like his brother Jack, Jerry was always one of pro wrestling's good boys who could be counted on to *go with the program* when it was required *for business.*

Wrestling's steroid scandal returned to national view in November 1991 when *Entertainment Tonight* reported the WWF's ballyhooed steroid testing program *was* a publicity stunt - that no testing had been conducted by the WWF since the program was announced several months earlier. Suddenly, just hours before the E-Treport was broadcast, the WWF conducted its first steroid test, asking wrestlers to provide urine specimens. Later, several WWF *gebronies* who were clean confessed they provided certain WWF star wrestlers with warm, bogus samples by urinating into balloons. A few weeks later, Superstar Billy Graham added more fuel to the steroid controversy when he told *Inside Edition* and several radio talk shows that Hulk Hogan lied when he denied steroid abuse. Still fuming over Hogan's stonewall on *Arsenio,* Graham said, "I *myself have personally injected Hulk Hogan with steroids.* I want him to be honest . . . he owes it to

the children of this country." Graham's revelation was backed up by David Shults of *20/20* fame, who said he injected Hogan more than 200 times.

Days later, Graham and Shults jacked up the *heat* by launching a media blitz, giving interviews to several radio talk shows, the *Miami Herald* and *New York Post.* In print, Graham again opened fire on Hogan with more drug allegations: *"Hulk,, right in front of me, offered me cocaine* and I said, 'Well, I just really don't feel like I need to start doing cocaine.' And *he said, 'God, you're smart because cocaine is the worst drug you could ever imagine to get off of And then he* [Hogan] *proceeded to shove cocaine up his nose right in front of me in 1983."* Then Shults added this provocative revelation: "Steroids are the tip of the iceberg. There's cocaine, marihuana, heroin, crack cocaine - it's a walking drugstore. *There's an iceberg here, and cocaine is just the tip . . . We're* [also] *talking about some of the top executives' sexual habits, their sexual preferences, sexual abuse and harassment.* Graham added, "It's been obvious there from the bookers for quite awhile. There were incidents when *they would approach a certain younger wrestler with a sexual compromise in exchange for an angle and higher pay checks and placement on cards.* It's common knowledge."

When sexual misconduct was tacked onto wrestling's steroid controversy, the nation's news media looked around for other wrestlers to confirm the new allegations. One of these was Barry Orton who wrestled in the WWF as Barry O. When Barry appeared on the *Wrestling Insiders* radio show in February 1992, he was asked if he knew of any wrestler who was *pushed* because of homosexual favors. Barry replied, "Absolutely, without a doubt. That goes on a lot." When Barry was asked to name names, he said: "Vince McMahon, Pat Patterson and Terry Garvin . . . The WWF is a little bit overrun by the homosexual community or clique. Like [WWF assistant *booker]* Terry Garvin, for instance. When I was 18 or 19 years old . . . he rode with me one time to Albuquerque. Didn't stop for six hours, 300 miles. He was begging me to let him perform a certain sexual task for six hours." Barry said he declined the invitation but was "damn sure that there's a guy who's never going to bat for me. Had I given in, who knows - I might be wearing the WWF championship belt right now. Not before going through Pat Patterson, of course." A few days later, the *New York Post's* Phil Mushnick congratulated Barry for *saying "out loud what has been*

whispered about for years - that WWF male executives engage in sexual harassment via a casting couch for male wrestlers"

About a month later, the *New York Post* launched another bombshell headline (WWF TO FACE SUIT ALLEGING CHILD SEX ABUSE) and reported a forthcoming lawsuit "alleging that male WWF administrative employees and executives sexually harassed and abused underage teen-age boys who were engaged as ring assistants in the mid-and late-1980s." Two days later, the WWF announced the resignations of vice president and *booker* Pat Patterson (Pierre Clemont) and his assistant *booker* Terry Garvin (Terry Joyal). Now, the combined allegations of drug abuse *and* pedophile harassment produced an avalanche of media attention in the days afterward. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* identified one of the underage ring boys as Tom Cole who worked for McMahon's WWF in 1985 when he was 13 years old. According to Cole, a WWF employee videotaped himself fondling Cole's feet and masturbating. Cole told the *Union-Tribune*, "He had a foot fetish. He would play with all the young boys' feet for hours at a time." Cole said his sexual harassment continued until he was fired in February 1990 after refusing an advance by another WWF official. Cole said, "They told me I was no longer needed. I know if I would've slept with those guys, I'd probably be rich by now. It was really sleazy." Then, another ringboy surfaced to tell his story. Chris Loss said he was 16 when he worked with McMahon's WWF for $100 a night in 1989. He said, "Boys are getting propositioned and played with all the time. You sort of put up with it because you can make a lot of money."

Then former WWF TV announcer Murray Hodgson went public with another allegation: that he was fired after rejecting a sexual advance by Pat Patterson. Hodgson said he was approached by Patterson who asked, "So you're the new guy? So what do you taste like?" Hodgson said he told Patterson, "You've got the wrong guy," after which Patterson allegedly told Hodgson, "Not if you want to keep your job with us." A few days later, Hodgson was fired, he said. Hodgson later filed a lawsuit against the WWF, but both the suit and Hodgson disappeared from view when Hodgson's attorney apparently lost confidence in his client. Nonetheless, allegations of sexual misconduct continued. Shortly after the ringboy revelations, Superstar Graham said sexual harassment by WWF officials had become "openly ridiculous" by the mid-1980s. Graham added: "The wrestlers don't

like it, but what can they do? They put up with it or get demoted." Barry Orton told *Entertainment Tonight,* "You see [homosexual harassment] go on all the time. You're coming out of the shower, and there's your *booker* standing there staring at your mid-section with that goofy look on his face, making groans and licking his lips."

When Vince McMahon was asked to respond to the ringboy allegations, he said: "Our investigation shows us there may have been some locker room horseplay, but there was never anything to my knowledge that was illegal or immoral. We don't tolerate that." But McMahon's qualified denial brought more disclosures from other former WWF wrestlers. Billy Jack Haynes told *Entertainment Tonight,* "I was taking a shower. Terry Garvin came in and put his hand on my ass. I also think he was trying to put his finger up my asshole. I grabbed him and said, 'Look, if you ever touch me again, I will kill you.'" And former WWF wrestler Tom Hankins wrote the *New York Post:* " Vince McMahon's denying of sexual charges against Pat Patterson and Terry Garvin is a laugh. Anyone seriously involved in the wrestling business knows only too well of both Patterson and Garvin's well-earned reputations." Hankins recalled an experience with Patterson at a Los Angeles bar one night in 1985. "After about an hour, I asked Patterson about giving me a shot at doing TV for them. He told me in no uncertain terms that there was only one way that I was ever going to work for them, and that was by having sexual relations with him that very night . . . I told him that I felt he was free to do as he pleased, but that I definitely wasn't interested in being a participant. He responded by reiterating that I would never work for the WWF in that case. He kept his word," Hankins said.

With wrestling's sex scandal opening the door to investigative reporting, the *Los Angeles Times* revisited Hulk Hogan's alleged cocaine use when it quoted Barry Orton: "Every time Hulk came into Las Vegas, he would call me up looking for some *blow.* A couple of years ago, he bought an *eight-ball* and did all of it in his hotel room after the show." The *L.A. Times* also reported Billy Jack Haynes' account of a car trip four years earlier with Hogan, Brian Blair and Brutus Beefcake from Madison Square Garden to Hogan's home in Stamford, Connecticut. Haynes said Hogan was driving in a snowstorm "about 80 miles an hour, drinking and smoking joints. I told Hogan he was crazy, and if we were stopped with all the drugs on him, his career would be over. Hulk said, 'Aw c'mon, smoke some pot.' We finally got to his house at about 4 a.m. and he came into the bedroom where I was and apologized to me. He said, 'You're absolutely right, man. I can't believe I was doing that.'" Then Haynes told the *Portland Oregonian* that he had injected Hogan with steroids in a Denver hotel room and recently received threatening telephone calls in connection with his public disclosures. Haynes said Vince McMahon " *wanted us to be drugged up. Every day, you'll be traveling and be being drugged up you were wrapped around his finger. The drugs made you content*" Another story in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* reported another Superstar Graham allegation: *"Hogan used cocaine before matches and would romp around the ring out of control, altering the score for what was supposed to be a choreographed performance.* Sometimes, Graham said, *Hogan would unintentionally injure his opponent while high on coke . . . He usually would apologize afterward."* When the *Union-Tribune* asked Hogan to respond, Hulk denied illegal drug use, saying, "I haven't heard anybody say anything," and he told the reporter not to call him again.

Hulk Hogan's continuing stonewall prompted more wrestlers to talk with reporters. Former WWF wrestler Ivan Putski (Joe Bednarski) told *People Magazine,* " Hulk always bragged about steroids. He'd say, 'Shit, I don't cycle. I don't get off of them. That's how I stay *over.*" And Ken Patera, another former WWF wrestler, told *People,* "Who *didn't* do steroids? The word came down from the promoters, especially McMahon, that you had to be bigger than life. The only way to do that was to take anabolic steroids." And wrestler Randy Culley, who performed as The

Assassin and Moondog Rex in the WWF, said, “Me and Hogan ran around together. He was real bold about the steroid use. And he also did Placidyl, quaaludes and cocaine.”

To control the growing scandal, Vince McMahon booked himself on CNN’s *Larry King Live* in March 1992. But CNN invited Bruno Sammartino and Barry Orton also to appear, to provide counterpoint. What happened that night on *Larry King* was, even by pro wrestling standards, a first-class farce orchestrated by the modern P.T. Barnum, Vince McMahon. McMahon’s performance was generally viewed as a combination of lies, distortions and intentionally misleading statements, especially when he said, “All I know is what I’ve read in the newspaper.” As the show progressed, McMahon became pugnacious, accusing his accusers. When Bruno Sammartino referred to an alleged pedophile incident involving WWF announcer Mel Phillips and an 11 year-old boy, McMahon asked if Bruno witnessed the incident; when Bruno talked about ringboy Tom Cole, McMahon denied his attorneys were negotiating an out-of-court settlement with Cole’s attorneys, an outrightlie as revealed the next week. McMahon denied announcer Phillips “has ever been an *employee* of the WWF,” a misleading technicality since Phillips was an *independent contractor.* When Barry Orton told *Larry King* about his experience with sexual harassment, McMahon interrupted him, badgering Orton with admonitions to “Be specific, Barry” and “Can you get to the issue, please.” After Orton finally finished his story, McMahon said, “If the environment was so heinous . . . why did you write me on two occasions while you were in prison, begging me to book you?” When McMahon defended the WWF’s family entertainment objective and the WWF’s *quality human beings,* Bruno cracked, “Like Hulk Hogan going on *Arsenio Hall* saying he never touched steroids.” McMahon replied, “He didn’t say he *never* touched steroids. He admitted steroid use, Bruno. Where were you?” To which Sammartino snapped, “Who are you b.s.-ing? You’re talking to Bruno Sammartino, who . . .” And McMahon interrupted, “Oh, yes, I’m talking to someone who’s real important . . . some demagogue, that’s what I’m talking with.”

McMahon’s *heel* act on *Larry King* didn’t *get over* with the show’s viewers and his continuing denials reminded many of Hulk Hogan’s stonewalling appearance on *Arsenio Hall.* Afterward, the *New York Post’s* Mushnick called McMahon’s defense “30 minutes worth of indignation and

unblinking lies." Days later, a CNN producer said, "We've gotten a lot of calls and *we've become more and more aware that Vince McMahon said little of the truth,* but we have to move on to other things."

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Leaping on the biggest mainstream pro wrestling story in 40 years, the *Donahue* TV show assembled a list of guests for yet another televised go-round on sex and drugs a few days later. This time, the participants were McMahon, former WWF announcer Murray Hodgson, ex- wrestlers Sammartino, Orton, Hankins and wrestling journalists John Arezzi and Dave Meltzer (David Shults also was booked to appear, but McMahon objected and the show's producers accommodated him). A well prepared Phil Donahue asked Hodgson, Orton and Hankins to tell their stories again. When Donahue asked McMahon to respond, Vince began a *heel turn.* Changing his TV talk show character, he politely observed, "We've never looked the other way in anything, and I'm very happy to confront everyone today with whatever allegation they have." After reminding viewers that the three WWF officials against whom allegations were made "are no longer with the WWF," McMahon said he had ordered an internal, independent investigation. "We may even learn something here today that my investigators do not know. I want to get to the bottom of it, just like you gentlemen do." Viewers who'd seen McMahon's prior *heel* performance on *Larry King* noted the obvious change in strategy, which wrestling journalist David Meltzer interpreted as *doing a job* on national TV by taking some rough *bumps* but ending his character transformation as a *babyface.*

After McMahon's *heel-to-babyface turn,* the *Donahue* show staggered and lurched from one allegation to another. One new disclosure came from John Arezzi, the wrestling radio talk show host: "Last night on my [radio] show," he said, "a midget wrestler by the name of Karate Kid alleged that in a dressing room, Pat Patterson made some sexual advances toward him. The leader of the midget group, Lord Littlebrook, went to Patterson and said, 'Leave this kid alone. He's not gay.' He scared the little guy, you know, to tears. They [midget wrestlers] were not used but one time after that, after that sexual advance."

Finally, Phil Donahue asked why these charges, although yet unproven, were coming out *now.* Oddly, it was the same question asked by Stanley Siegel to Eddie Mansfield, Lou Thesz and me on Lifetime-TV's *America Talks Back* in 1985. Now, Dave Meltzer answered Donahue this way: *"There's never been a forum for them before . . . you have to understand that the wrestling business has always been a totally closed entity. It's like - almost like elementary school. You don't snitch"* But surprisingly, Donahue asked no questions about ringboy Tom Cole, and later in the week, the *New York Post* told why - just hours *before* the *Donahue* telecast, Cole's attorney negotiated an out-of-court settlement with the WWF in which Cole was paid $70,000 and given a multi-year contract to return to his former job. All that the WWF asked of Cole was to cancel his *Donahue* appearance.

Near the end of the broadcast, Donahue asked the panel if they wanted to *get the posse and string up Vince McMahon.* Orton said he didn't intend to lynch Vince, but wanted to make it clear that wrestlers, as a group, are *powerless.* And Bruno added, "What you folks don't know is that *you don't go to authorities if you want to eat because you're dead. You're finished, kaput, blackballed . . . there's no union, there's no protection for the wrestler.'* Then in the show's closing moments, a *Donahue* audience member asked this question - *"Isn't wrestling fixed anyway?"* Running out of TV time, the question was left hanging in the air. And ringing in my ears. More than anything else, that especially stupid question said it all - something I'd now heard so many times over many years: *the ignorant viewpoint that wrestling's abuses didn't matter because the industry is, after all, grounded in fakery.*

Gradually, some important truths about pro wrestling's working conditions were emerging from the 1992 allegations, and it reminded older wrestling fans of my 15 minutes of wrestling fame on *20/20* in 1985. At about this time in 1992, I got several telephone calls from some people who remembered me as "the *person whose original claims of sexual harassment rocked the wrestling world in 1985,"* wrote Alex Marvez of the *Miami*

Herald. I was asked to appear on Ric Carter's *Wrestle talk* radio show on KLAV in Las Vegas to talk about my experiences with homosexual harassment years before. After reciting the circumstances of my blacklisting, I said the current sex scandal in wrestling had a broader context in the industry's long history of illegal business and labor practices, and I again talked about the need for a wrestlers' union. In discussing the wrestling industry's history of illegalities, I brought up the Justice Department's investigation of The Business in the 1950s and the NWA's 1956 consent decree. And I said, "the NWA paid big-time money to high-priced law firms to keep this thing *covered up and out of public scrutiny"*

That particular contention triggered a response from then NWA lawyer Robert Trobich of Charlotte, North Carolina. Trobich complained my allegation of a cover-up was "without merit" and asserted the 1956 consent decree had nothing to do with wrestler treatment. It was clear that Trobich didn't know what he was talking about and hadn't seen the 3,000 pages of Justice Department and FBI documents I had studied. Now, I'm no lawyer but I always do my homework and I'm tenacious when the opportunity comes to *shoot* with The Business. I wrote a response to Trobich, published in *Three Count*, saying that since the 1956 consent decree dealt specifically with the NWA's monopolistic business practices and blacklisting, it therefore certainly *did* involve wrestler treatment - their employment opportunities and compensation. I also explained that my comment about the NWA's *cover-up* was based on certain facts from the Justice Department's own files - namely that the NWA wanted to avoid a public trial in 1956, and that Sam Muchnick lobbied the Justice Department to postpone its announcement of the consent judgment to a slow news weekend in Iowa. For Trobich's benefit, I also named the attorneys and their law firms who had lobbied the Justice Department to dissolve the consent degree in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and I cited my sources for these contentions - the Justice Department's own files that I obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. I encouraged Trobich and anybody else interested in the truth not to just take my word for it, but to examine the evidence.

A week or so after KLAV's radio broadcast, the leader of a group of reform-minded wrestling fans in New York City called me. The guy on the other end of the phone was soft-spoken Dore DeQuattro, a professional

musician whose band performed every Monday night at a Manhattan restaurant. Dore said that in the days since Vince McMahon appeared on the *Larry King* and *Donahue* shows, he and other New York wrestling fans worried that the mainstream media were not getting the truth about pro wrestling's misconduct and labor problems. Dore had organized an *ad hoc* group of wrestling fans named Committee to Clean Up Wrestling to do something about it, and they had decided to hold a press conference in New York City to educate reporters about the facts of life in pro wrestling. Dore thought I had something to contribute and invited me to join a group of other past and present wrestling figures to tell our stories.

I was happy to help and flew to New York in late March 1992 for the Committee to Clean Up Wrestling's press conference. Behind a maze of microphones and TV cameras from CBS, WPIX, WINS, WPLJ and several New York radio stations, I told my story again and said the recent homosexual allegations were part of a longer history of such conduct inside The Business. I also told the press conference about *heterosexual* harassment of women wrestlers, and I cited a sworn affidavit by woman wrestler Linda Chandler who had complained years earlier about the demand for sexual favors by then NWA world champion Harley Race and other male wrestlers; at the time of the New York press conference, I didn't yet know about the more recent experiences of Rita Marie (Rita Chatterton) or Missy Hyatt (Melissa Hiatt) or Chyna (Joanie Laurer) and others, although I could have guessed. I again recited my view that the wrestling industry's labor problems constituted a *freedom issue* - that wrestlers had no civil or human rights, that the current steroid and other drug problems amounted to *genocide of a generation of wrestlers,* that wrestlers needed a union to protect themselves and Congress should investigate the wrestling industry to illuminate its abuses. I ended my presentation with a punchline I'd been using for about twenty years - *professional wrestlers are sacrificing their bodies for an industry that's the only form of sports entertainment without a labor association or union.* Afterward, a couple of New York sportswriters, young enough to be my sons, wanted to know how long ago I was an All-American at the University of Georgia. I told them it was a long time ago.

After I stepped aside, Murray Hodgson talked about his sexual harassment lawsuit and when one reporter asked why he was going public,

Murray replied, *"Somebody has got to come forward - the mainstream media have never taken wrestling for real"* After Hodgson spoke, wrestling journalist John Arezzi talked about how McMahon's WWF put its *thumb* on his radio show *(Pro Wrestling Spotlight)* on WGBB in Babylon, New York. Sounding defeated and resigned, Arezzi spoke softly: "Vince McMahon not only tries to buy people off - people who are alleging certain sexual practices involving employees or former employees - but he has no regard for the legitimate wrestling media in this country . . . Vince tries to not only fix the game in the ring, but *outside the ring as well,'* he said. The press conference ended with this announcement by Dore DeQuattro: "If WWF doesn't clean up its act, this group [Committee to Clean Up Wrestling] threatens to organize a massive boycott of its merchandise operation and all its major sponsors." But in the months to follow, no boycotts of WWF merchandise or TV sponsors were organized by the Committee to Clean Up Wrestling or anybody else. Not yet.

A few days after the Committee to Clean Up Wrestling's New York press conference, Geraldo Rivera's *Now It Can Be Told* TV show enlarged wrestling's sex scandal with more sensational revelations. Unknown to the viewing public, Geraldo's wrestling exposé had encountered obstacles to getting on the air when McMahon's lawyers maneuvered to stop it with threats and bullying; as John Arrezi had said on *Donahue,* "Vince tries to not only fix the game in the ring, but *outside the ring as well"* Despite the WWF's lawyerly saber-rattling, Geraldo finally broadcast a 30-minute segment entitled "Wrestling's Ring of Vice" around the country and it attracted attention.

As McMahon had feared, Geraldo produced new allegations from two former WWF referees, Rita Marie (Rita Chatterton) and Mike Clark. Rita Marie refereed in the mid-1980s when, she said, Vince McMahon "promised me the world. [He said] 'How are you going to feel when you walk past the newsstand and see your face on the cover of *Time* magazine. There's all kinds of money to be made here. You're looking at a half million dollars a year contract' and so on. Things started happening. Suddenly, I

was refereeing at Madison Square Garden." But when Rita Marie asked McMahon for *more* referee work, he invited her into his limo, she said. "He started telling me that he's really neglected doing something with my career and it's really time that Rita Marie came to be. The next thing I know, he [McMahon] unzipped his pants and took my hand and kept putting my hand on his penis. He started telling me that he knew I didn't have [another] job . . . [and] he knew I had a daughter, and that he could make me or break me, the choice was mine. He made me have oral sex. And he started to get really excited and I pulled away and he got really angry and said it was worth a half-million dollars a year. And when I said no, he said I had better satisfy him and he pulled my pants off and he pulled me on top of him and he satisfied himself through intercourse . . .

I had sex with him to satisfy him or I went nowhere and I was *blacklisted"* she said.

The other referee allegation came from Mike Clark who refereed WWF shows in Canada during the 1980s. Clark said his bookings were stopped after he refused a sexual invitation from WWF assistant *booker* Terry Garvin. Clark said Terry Garvin told him: "If you want to come to the TV tapings, I'll bring you to the TV tapings and I'll *book* you all across every event in Canada.' And I said, 'Geez, that would be great!' And he [Terry Garvin] said to me - 'How would you like to lie on the bed and have me perform oral sex on you and I'll give you $500 dollars?'" Clark said he turned down Terry Garvin's offer, adding this graphic footnote: inside the WWF, the ring crew and referees were named *The Cream Team* by Patterson, Terry Garvin and Mel Phillips. "People like me and everybody else who worked for the wrestling business know about this," he said. " *The WWF is just filth, lies and cheaters - that's the way the company's been built"* Clark said.

Then Geraldo Rivera closed his telecast by recounting his recent legal battles with WWF lawyers to get "Wrestling's Ring of Vice" on the air. Still bristling from what he called "threats and bluster" by the WWF to stop him from airing a taped interview with ringboy Tom Cole, Geraldo opened Cole's earlier affidavit, already in the public record. Standing face-to-face with his TV audience, Geraldo read parts of Cole's affidavit in which Cole asserted the WWF's sexual abuse left him "emotionally scarred." As "Wrestling's Ring of Vice" closed, Geraldo looked squarely into the camera

and asserted: *"This investigation has scarred the already controversial reputation of the WWF and there is no lawyer on this planet who can stop me from saying that"* As expected, McMahon later sued Geraldo and his show's distributor for "reckless disregard of the truth" which prompted Rivera to respond, *"It's a mark of honor to be sued by the WWF -1 will bodyslam them in court"* Later, the WWF's lawsuit was dropped.

A few hours after Geraldo Rivera's *Now It Can Be Told* was broadcast, *CBS Evening News* drew even more national attention to pro wrestling's scandal and disgrace: *"Pro wrestling"*, said a CBS reporter, *"is to sport what Jim and Tammy Bakker are to religion and ripple is to wine - very distant relatives."* After a brief review of recent allegations made by Barry Orton, Murray Hodgson, Superstar Graham and David Shults, *CBS News* interviewed midget wrestler Karate Kid (Chris Dube) who said the main reason he didn't get more work in the WWF was because he wouldn't go to bed with a WWF official. Committed to even-handed reporting, CBS asked Vince McMahon for his response to the numerous charges against his company, and Vince smirked, "Some of these allegations are absolutely absurd . . . it just seems as though they're all ganging up on us, all at one time." Then CBS editorially echoed my recommendation at the New York Committee to Clean Up Wrestling press conference when it concluded, *"There is a crescendo of opinion - Congress ought to investigate."* The CBS segment ended with this prediction: *"wrestling, or whatever this is, has survived scandals before and there is no reason to believe that this one, too, won't be drowned out by all those fans who couldn't care less"* Truer words about pro wrestling were never written nor spoken.

By the end of 1992, there were warning signs of public backlash against the WWF: for the first time, Hulk Hogan was getting booed at arenas and only 30,000 tickets were sold in advance for the 70,000 seat Indianapolis HoosierDome, site of *Wrestlemania VIII.* Some advertising and merchandising executives predicted TV sponsors would soon distance themselves from wrestling's scandal, terminating sponsorship contracts. At WWF headquarters in Stamford, a visibly aging Vince McMahon nervously

expected still more embarrassing allegations waiting in the wings at the *New York Post,* the only mainstream newspaper that now gave pro wrestling sustained scrutiny through the reporting of Phil Mushnick. McMahon had reason to be worried - at stake was survival of an entertainment empire he spent nine years building, albeit with ruthless disregard for the victims of his scorched- earth rough ride to the top. McMahon may have sensed the next wave of scandal would focus on his own arrogant conduct.

Still, as a successful wrestling promoter, McMahon undoubtedly felt confident he could *work* public opinion and call the *finish.* Until now, McMahon had done just that: he had controlled most of the damage from revelations about his wrestlers' *steroid abuse* (by Superstar Billy Graham, David Shults, Bruno Sammartino, Roddy Piper, Mike Rotundo, Brian Blair, Dan Spivey, Rick Martel, Dr. George Zahorian and Ken Patera) and revelations about *Hulk Hogan's steroid and other drug use* (by Superstar Graham, David Shults, Barry Orton, Billy Jack Haynes, Ivan Putski and Randy Culley) and allegations of *sexual misconduct within the WWF* (by David Shults, Superstar Graham, Barry Orton, Tom Cole, Chris Loss, Murray Hodgson, Billy Jack Haynes, Tom Hankins, Karate Kid, Rita Chatterton and Mike Clark). That long list of whistleblowers who'd been *shooting* on McMahon stretched to about 20 persons but through it all, he obeyed professional instinct to *work* the required response. And his apparent success reflected McMahon's mastery of deception which he often expressed this way: *the less fans know, the better off things are.*

But there *are* limits to *working* public opinion, as some emerging hard facts now showed: WWF arena attendance dropped 40%, its TV ratings collapsed and merchandise sales plummeted to all-time lows. A 1993 survey by Sports Management Group of Dallas found WWF wrestling to be *"the most disliked sport"* in the country. The other shoe finally dropped in February 1993 when the *New York Post* reported "a federal probe into the WWF apparently has intensified . . . the initial focus of the probe - the WWF's systematic involvement with steroids - has grown to include tax evasion, violation of child labor laws, pedophilia, the exchange of sex for employment and illegal drug use and distribution beyond steroids."

Shortly afterward, the U.S. Justice Department, after an 18-month investigation, convened a grand jury that indicted Vince McMahon and his Titan Sports on November 18, 1993 for *conspiracy to distribute anabolic*

steroids and *defraud* the Food and Drug Administration during 1985 to 1991. After arraignment, McMahon was released on $250,000 bond and quietly resigned as president of the WWF's parent company Titan Sports, turning his title over to wife Linda. In the meantime, WWF PR functionaries undertook heavy lifting on the propaganda front by talking to reporters about the WWF's charity work for the Special Olympics and its "Headlock for Hunger" and modern daycare center for WWF mothers of young children. Even Hulk Hogan was recruited to perform damage control, telling the *New York Daily News,* "People (were) saying that they injected me at certain arenas. *Total lie, total lie, never happened. I gave myself any injections there ever was. Or a doctor, under his prescription"* Later, Hogan appeared on Pat Robertson's *700 Club,* telling the Christian conservative audience he'd been born again, had taken the wrong road earlier in his career but now *wanted to spread the message of God!*

As the Justice Department again moved against The Business, pro wrestling's institutional history of spoiled credibility resurfaced at once. When jurors were selected, Judge Jacob Mishner dismissed several potential jurors who said they believed that because wrestling is fake, the trial was fake, too. Even after an acceptable jury was selected, the Judge warned the jury: *"Do not question whether wrestling is sports or entertainment* . . . The only issue at stake is . . . distribution and to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. This is the substance, not whether wrestling is phoney or sports or entertainment." But McMahon's defense attorney Laura Brevetti kept the real-fake issue alive when she told the jury, *"If you don't like wrestling, don't take that out on him* [McMahon]." Justice Department prosecutors told the jury: "This case is about the dark, corrupt underbelly of Titan Sports which pumped up wrestlers for profit. . . . They were corporate outlaws, headed by the sole owner . . . a cunning and sophisticated drug dealer." But could the Justice Department prove its *real* charges to a jury that already *knew* wrestling wasn't real?

The facts of the case against McMahon and Titan Sports had the same time-frame as the previous Zahorian trial, and prosecutors again showed widespread steroid use and abuse among WWF wrestlers during most of the 1980s. On this point, some evidence came from convicted felon Dr. Zahorian who admitted selling anabolic steroids (and Valium, Tylenol-3 and-4 and Halcion) to wrestlers from 1981 or 1982 to 1989; Zahorian said

98% to 99% of his customers were WWF wrestlers. Zahorian also said McMahon asked him in early 1988 if he was giving steroids to WWF wrestlers and he had replied, “I was, but it was better they got pharmaceutical-grade steroids than black market drugs from people they didn’t know. I told him [McMahon] if he wanted me to stop, I would, but that wrestlers might end up getting tainted drugs and they could get sick and die. He [McMahon] said, ‘Okay, don’t stop what you’re doing.” Zahorian said he was the WWF’s ringside doctor in Pennsylvania until he got a telephone call from McMahon’s lieutenant Pat Patterson, asking Zahorian to return the call on a pay telephone; Zahorian testified that when he returned the call, Patterson told him there was a drug investigation of the WWF in progress and that he [Zahorian] should destroy all phone numbers and files that identified WWF wrestlers - and not attend any more WWF shows as ringside doctor.

In addition to Zahorian, eight wrestlers were dragged into court to testify about illegal drug use and trafficking in the WWF, although they did not add appreciably to what had been learned in the earlier Zahorian trial. Wrestler Moondog Rex (Randy Cully) admitted buying large amounts for his own use and said WWF road agents advised wrestlers to see Zahorian “if you looked like you were worn out;” he said he ingested Anavar to become more muscular after Vince McMahon told him to lose weight. Wrestler Tom Zenk admitted steroid use and said road agent Jack Lanza told him, ‘If you want anything, he’s [Zahorian] got it” and Lanza offered a cash advance to pay for the drugs. The Warlord (Terry Szopinski) testified he used steroids, injected other WWF wrestlers and flushed used needles down locker room toilets; he said WWF referee and road agent Dave Hebner told him he could get steroids and pills from Zahorian, although McMahon told wrestlers to leave their drugs at home during road trips. Wrestler Tully Blanchard said McMahon was concerned about cocaine, not anything else and wrestler Rick Rude admitted steroid use and recalled a conversation with Vince McMahon about Rick’s interest in starting a family. Rick testified, “I told him I was trying to establish a family so I was not on anything. He told me to push myself. I understood that to mean [that if] I wasn’t taking anything [I should be]. “You mean steroids?” Rude was asked. “Yes”, replied Rick. Rick’s account of the conversation was remembered by another wrestler, Nailz (Kevin Wacholz) who said he overheard it; Nailz claimed McMahon “told Rude that in the position he

was in [main events against Ultimate Warrior], he needed him to be bigger." According to Nailz, McMahon told Rude to "go on the gas." Nailz also testified that McMahon told him in early 1992 that he needed to be as big as he could be. "He said I needed to get on the *gas.* I told him I would not get on steroids to get the job. He [McMahon] told me, 'Sometimes life isn't fair - the ball's in your court. Do what you have to do.'" Another witness was Ultimate Warrior (Jim Hellwig), whose steroid use was so obvious he was nicknamed *Anabolic Warrior* by cynical insiders. Warrior confirmed his steroid use, saying his suppliers included *a Ft. Worth doctor who worked for the Texas Athletic Commission* that supervised wrestling in that state. Warrior also said an angry Vince McMahon once telephoned him after he'd left steroids in a Marriott hotel near Washington, D.C.'s Capital Center; when asked what McMahon was angry about, Warrior said, "Getting caught." Another wrestler witness was Big John Studd (John Minton) who said, "Steroids were a very important part of our regimen" but "I never saw it forced on anyone."

The trial witness everybody wanted to see and hear was Hulk Hogan, *now given immunity for his testimony.* As the most famous body in pro wrestling history slumped into the witness chair, Hulk was asked, "Before this trial, did you give statements to the press that weren't true?"

"Yes," Hogan replied.

"Is it fair to say that you did not give your full history of your steroid use?"

"Very true," Hogan said.

"On *Arsenio Hall?"* he was asked.

"Yes," answered Hogan.

Hogan now admitted he began using oral and injectable steroids, including Dianabol, Anavar, Winstrol, testosterone and Decadurabolin, in mid-1976 but said he stopped in 1989. He said he used steroids to get bigger and placed orders with Zahorian by calling McMahon's office assistant Emily Feinberg. He said he also bought steroids from "a Dr. Lebowitz in New York and a Dr. War in Canada and also Dr. Bob Paunnovich of Denver, a close personal friend." Then Terry Bollea was asked: *"You got to be Hulk Hogan in part because of steroids?"* Hogan replied, *"In part"* But Hogan again insisted he used steroids to heal from

injuries and to maintain a tough road schedule and for bodybuilding. He said he believed steroid use was legal in the 1980s (it was, with a doctor's prescription) and estimated 75% to 80% of WWF wrestlers used steroids in the 1983 to 1984 period. He confirmed that Zahorian supplied wrestlers with steroids, sleeping pills, diet pills, Tylenol-3 and-4 and Valium, but insisted he paid for his own drugs, not McMahon nor Titan Sports. Hogan was asked if Zahorian *prescribed* steroids for him: "He gave me a prescription pad," Hogan replied.

" Dr. Zahorian just *gave* them to you with no limit on the number?"

"Yes", Hogan said .

In prosecuting Vince McMahon and his WWF, Justice Department prosecutors had no difficulty proving widespread steroid use and abuse among WWF wrestlers during most of the 1980s and unlawful distribution by Dr. Zahorian (and other doctors around the country). But for evidence that McMahon and his wrestling company were "big, rich, powerful corporate drug *dealers*," Government lawyers turned to two witnesses from the WWF's front office - McMahon's former secretary Emily Feinberg and the WWF's liaison officer with state athletic commissions, Anita Scales. Neither name was known to wrestling fans, since both worked behind the scenes at WWF headquarters in Connecticut, although Feinberg sometimes accompanied McMahon on road trips and her relationship with the boss had been the object of speculation among some wrestlers.

Feinberg is a striking beauty and former model and *Playboy* playmate who was McMahon's *executive assistant* from 1987 to 1991 when she coordinated the WWF's drug testing program (instituted after Jim Duggan and Iron Sheik were arrested in 1987). Feinberg testified that McMahon's drug testing cared only about cocaine and when opiate and barbiturate positives appeared in wrestlers' urine, McMahon had told her "wrestlers' life is very grueling," that wrestlers needed drugs to get up, drugs to get to sleep and drugs to control their *'roid rages.* Feinberg said she learned steroid argot - gas, *riggs, juice* - from McMahon and Pat Patterson, and other WWF office personnel knew about '*roid rages* because some wrestlers had torn apart hotel rooms during a European tour. A few months later, she testified, McMahon told her to send the first of many checks "that couldn't be traced" to Dr. Zahorian, checks drawn on corporate funds and written off as company medical expenses. To document WWF steroid

purchases, she produced her steno notebook that contained her notes for about a dozen WWF steroid transactions between 1988 and 1989; she said she arranged steroid purchases for both Hogan and McMahon (whose personal steroid supply was kept in an office refrigerator). Feinberg said when McMahon was tipped off to the Feds' drug investigation of his company, he told WWF wrestlers not to use Zahorian anymore and instructed her to destroy all "*roids* correspondence," to clean out the WWF's Fedex receipts for Zahorian shipments and move vials of McMahon's personal steroid supply from the office refrigerator to her home; Feinberg testified McMahon didn't want anything traceable to Zahorian or steroids in the WWF's offices and she helped McMahon write a memo to wrestlers that told them to carry steroid prescriptions with them on road trips.

After Feinberg's provocative courtroom appearance, the WWF's liaison officer for state athletic commissions, Anita Scales, testified about trying to get rid of the *wrestlers' pharmacist,* Dr. Zahorian. Scales said after Pennsylvania *deregulated* pro wrestling in 1989, it required promoters to hire a ringside doctor and it was her job to find one. She said she tried to terminate Dr. Zahorian (because he was "bad news" and "a real sleazy guy," she said), and retain another doctor for Pennsylvania shows, but Zahorian objected. So did McMahon's lieutenant Pat Patterson who told her, "The *boys* want Zahorian," and WWF road agent Joe Scarpa (formerly ChiefJay Strongbow, my world tag team champion partner) who told her, " Zahorian has to be hired because *the boys want their candies* [barbiturates]." Scales said she told Scarpa, "The *boys* can get their damn *candies* elsewhere." After that, Scales sought advice from McMahon's wife and WWF vice president Linda McMahon, a lawyer and her immediate supervisor. Scales testified, "I explained to her [Linda McMahon] that I was receiving pressure to assign Zahorian to Hershey and I believed it was my responsibility to make the choice, but I was being asked to assign Zahorian . . . Pat [Patterson] wants me to assign him, but I've heard bad things and I don't want him there." Scales said Linda McMahon told her, "Do what Pat [Patterson] tells you." As a result, Scales hired Dr. Zahorian for a WWF show in Hershey, Pennsylvania in December 1989. But shortly before that show, one of Linda McMahon's assistants told Scales that Zahorian could *not* work the Hershey event because the McMahons had been *tipped off by a politically connected friend at a cocktail party to a federal drug*

investigation of the WWF, already underway. Then, Scales testified, she went back to Pat Patterson, saying, "*You* wanted him there - *you* get rid of him!"

At this point in the trial, Justice Department prosecutors produced their *smoking gun* - a WWF in-house memo written by Linda McMahon to Pat Patterson which said the McMahons had been tipped off to the drug investigation and instructed Patterson to stop Zahorian's scheduled appearance as the WWF's ringside doctor at the upcoming Hershey show. The memo also told Patterson "Vince agreed, and would like for you to call Zahorian to tell him not to come to any more of our events and to also *clue him in on any action that the Justice Department is thinking of taking.'* The *smoking gun* memo was significant evidence because it explained why Patterson had called Zahorian telling him to return the call on a pay phone and why Patterson instructed Zahorian to destroy all phone numbers and identifying information about wrestlers. The *smoking gun* memo also proved, said Government prosecutors, the WWF tried to cover up its steroid trafficking conspiracy.

In the trial's closing moments, Justice prosecutors characterized McMahon's wrestling empire as "*corporate outlaws,* headed by the sole owner, the defendant, a cunning and sophisticated drug dealer." They argued Linda McMahon's *smoking gun* memo not only ordered the coverup but showed three of the company's top people knew what they were doing was illegal - why else would McMahon want untraceable laundered checks to get steroids to their biggest star [Hulk Hogan]? "This hugely successful money machine mixed up chemical cocktails to get wrestlers pumped up and keep them going. *It's shameful and it's illegal. . . Vince McMahon used wrestlers like slabs of meat and pumped them up with steroids for profit,,*" the Government's prosecutor thundered.

After deliberating two days, the jury returned with its surprising verdict: *Not Guilty.* Nearly all trial observers were stunned at the outcome, wondering how McMahon had *worked* yet another collection of *marks*

- this time, a jury. Later, one juror said, "Based on the evidence presented to us, we could not convict the man," a remark that raised questions about the strength of the Government's case, especially the confusing mix of dates and numbers of certain steroid shipments entered into evidence. But a more likely explanation for the trial outcome was found in the words of

McMahon's defense attorney Laura Brevetti who had told the jury in courtroom proceedings, "*Nobody respects wrestling, nobody respects wrestlers. It's not America's pastime*." Or, put differently, nobody takes pro wrestling seriously.

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Whatever caused the surprising trial outcome, which cost the McMahons about $3 million in attorney fees, Vince enjoyed his good luck, confidently concluding afterward "more than anything else, the WWF was again found innocent of these scurrilous charges that were hurled against us." A few days after the verdict, one of McMahon's former wrestlers, Steve Musulin, published an open letter to the wrestling community: "In 1984, I was involved in a terrible auto accident in which I incurred a spinal cord injury. I now struggle to walk with two canes. I was convicted of vehicular homicide because another man was killed. I had passed out at the wheel while under the influence of Placidyl, a drug I had gotten from Dr. Zahorian. After six months of hospitalization, I did nine months in the big house. It was a terrible place. My ex-partner, Quick Draw Rick McGraw overdosed on the same drug. It was one of his favorites. . . . Vince Sr. was a prince of a guy. His son is a *scumbag* in my book."

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Seventeen months after McMahon's trial, FBI agents were investigating charges of witness tampering and obstruction of justice connected with McMahon's defense attorney Laura Brevetti. According to the *New York Post*, the Justice Department believed Brevetti's husband Martin Bergman had posed as a TV producer for *60 Minutes*, *Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair* and *American Journal* and may have pumped trial witness Emily Feinberg for information and offered Feinberg a substantial sum for "telling her story in a book or on a TV exposé," instead of to the trial's jury. According to the *Post*, the FBI also was investigating whether Brevetti's

husband wrote pre-trial smear articles for the *New York Observer* about Anthony Valenti (Justice Department investigator in the McMahon case) and Sean O'Shea (the Government's prosecutor of that case). After the *New York Post's* revelations, both Bergman and Brevetti denied wrongdoing, but Vince McMahon used his weekly TV wrestling show *Raw Is War* to launch a national attack on the *Post's* Phil Mushnick and his "government cronies as lacking ethics and lying to the media as well as to the judge and jury during the trial." McMahon said, "Yellow journalists conspired with vengeful public officials" to fabricate a witness tampering story "that is as farfetched as the charges brought against me." When the FBI investigation of witness tampering resulted in no further legal action, nobody familiar with the Justice Department's prior experience with The Business was very surprised. Although the wrestling industry has always cycled and recycled through periods of boom and bust in popularity, its historical relationship with law enforcement and the halls of justice has been a constant flatline of indifference. Somehow history repeats - especially in pro wrestling.

But nothing is forever and the ultimate exposé of pro wrestling's remaining secrets was not far off. This time, however, The Business would be exposed not by fumbling Government investigators and naive Justice Department attorneys. This time, the final chapter in wrestling's untold story would be revealed in the private sector by accountants, medical examiners and wives of dead wrestlers. And by a few more courageous wrestlers who refused to lay down for more *heel* mayhem.

Chapter 12

T H E B U S I N E S S E X P O S E D

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IS an unusual con. Unlike other con games that view their customers as *marks*, wrestling is not generally viewed as either illegal or immoral. Nobody has been seriously fooled by pro wrestling's con for a long time; the last time people placed money bets on the outcome of a wrestling match was probably in April 1917, when Joe Stecher *did a job* for Earl Caddock in Omaha and hundreds of Nebraskans lost thousands of dollars and some, their farms. Today, wrestling's fraud is seen as a happy moral misdemeanor: *marks* are entertained, the *boys* make easy money and promoters effortlessly became wealthy. In a rare unguarded moment, former Chicago wrestling promoter Bob Luce said, *"This is the last bastion of free enterprise! In wrestling, we aren't involved in unions, we aren't involved in big corporations, and we don't have to kiss anybody's ass! All we have to do is go out there and put on a show and draw people! That's why the boys do stunts like fighting in a cage, and that's why you see them bleeding in the ring and throwing each other up in the air! . . . Wrestling is what America is all about!!"*

By the late 1990s, the structure and economics of The Business had changed so much that wrestling's joyful noise extended well beyond the ring. Out of sight, new and larger arenas in major cities were happy to rent space and sell parking, hotdogs and drinks; TV stations loved the profits that accrued from syndicated wrestling shows and cable-TV operators got to keep about half the revenue produced by wrestling pay-per-view events (now more lucrative than PPV boxing and rock concerts) and manufacturers of T-shirts, posters, toys, video tapes and games, music videos and wrestling dolls happily counted the industry's newest sources of revenue. What or where is the harm in any of this?

Harm is not something wrestlers worry much about. In the ring, they've been taught to pull punches and take *bumps;* if they worry at all, they worry about *potatoes* - wrestling lingo for a punch or kick not pulled, either accidentally or intentionally. Since getting hurt is not in the script, a wrestler experiencing pain will give his opponent *the office* - two quick

squeezes on the arm or leg which say, *"You're hurting me, loosen up, sucker!"* But there's this, too - a wrestler dealt a *potato* will usually retaliate with a *receipt* - a retaliating punch or kick that's also not pulled. A *receipt* tells the other guy, *"I can get as rough as you want"*

In the 1990s, The Business itself was hit with a serious of *potatoes* and *receipts* that finally exposed pro wrestling's chaotic, abusive and dishonest working conditions. It was not pretty for those paying attention.

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One aspect of pro wrestling's working conditions - its exploitation of performers - was exposed by future Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura, the first wrestler to hire an agent. In 1987, Jesse hired Barry Bloom; several years later, with Bloom's help, Jesse staged his most memorable wrestling tussle in a federal courthouse by suing Vince McMahon and Titan Sports for exploiting him and then lying about it. This story begins in spring 1984 when Jesse began wrestling for Vince McMahon's WWF with the industry's traditional oral agreement. Later, a medical condition forced him out of the ring but he returned to the WWF as *heel* wrestling announcer, operating under the same oral agreement that paid him $1,000 a week. On the *stick*, Jesse quickly gained a following for his quick-witted *heel* commentary. In early 1985, the WWF offered Jesse a written contract which he signed under rushed circumstances on his way to the ring (as seems to have been a WWF custom); it happened when Jesse walked out of the dressing room and McMahon's deputy and TV announcer Gorilla Monsoon (Bob Marella) told Jesse to sign or he wouldn't work that night. Jesse signed *under duress*, he said later. Months afterward, Jesse and the WWF parted company (according to Jesse, he was fired; according to the WWF, he quit) in order for Jesse to pursue a film career in Hollywood.

While in Hollywood, Jesse met talent agent Barry Bloom who told Jesse something important: the prevailing standard for merchandise royalty splits in the entertainment industry was 75/25 in favor of the entertainer, just the opposite of pro wrestling. Although his movie career was moderately successful, Jesse returned to the WWF in 1986 as TV commentator and about a year later, Jesse hired Bloom to renegotiate his

TV deal with NBC-TV's Dick Ebersol on the WWF's *Saturday Night's Main Event.* Drawing on his experience in the entertainment industry, Bloom demanded the usual video and merchandising royalties for Jesse but the WWF refused Bloom's demand, saying it paid royalties only to *feature performers* and Jesse was not a *feature performer.* So, Jesse signed a contract without royalties. In subsequent years, Bloom negotiated Jesse's contract renewals, and each year's negotiation involved Bloom again asking for royalties and the WWF denying them as a matter of company policy. The WWF's vice president Richard Glover repeatedly told Bloom and Jesse that no talent received royalties unless they were the *featured performer.* Jesse continued to announce on the WWF's TV shows through July 1990 when he was fired because he accepted an offer to do his own wrestling video game, he said.

Later, Jesse recalled: "Even after I left the WWF, Vince McMahon still found ways to exploit me. He was very big into marketing, and he had my voice and likeness on about ninety videotapes that he had for sale. I asked him once why he was making all this money off of me, yet I wasn't seeing a dime of it. He'd said, 'C'mon Ventura, nobody gets royalties off of videotape. Hulk Hogan doesn't get royalties. Why would you?' And I believed him . . . As it turned out, I had been lied to for several years, because Hulk Hogan and others were getting royalties on their videotapes. I actually took Vince McMahon's company to court over the royalty issue and the court agreed with me that had I known the truth, I would not have agreed to perform unless I got royalties, too," Jesse said. In brief, McMahon and his company's officials lied to both Jesse and his agent, and Jesse's prior contracts with the WWF were therefore fraudulent. "We learned that Vince had made $25 million from the ninety videotapes I was on. When they applied a fair royalty rate to those tapes, it came out to about $800,000. And after interest was added in, I walked away from that lawsuit with about a million dollars," Jesse said. Afterward, Jesse's attorney Alan Eidsness said: *"Wrestlers were like serfs. The kings were the ones that made the decisions. The jury decided the kings were wrong."* And Jesse added, *"I'm hoping it brings to light what's gone on in the world of wrestling. Wrestlers have never been allowed to unionize. Wrestling evolved from the carnivals. They've tried to keep us back in those carnival days. It doesn't behoove promoters to have wrestlers who know what their rights are"*

Jesse Ventura's million dollar jury award should be placed in perspective because there's a lot of mythology about wrestler compensation. Persons outside The Business seem to think pro wrestling is extremely lucrative, but the strange truth is most wrestlers are poorly compensated even though a few stars make big money. It is a question of perspective, of course, which is why it's important to know pro wrestling's annual gross revenue and the portion of that revenue devoted to wrestler compensation. Although *Forbes* magazine had *estimated* wrestling's annual revenues earlier, this generally secret aspect of The Business was *unequivocally exposed* five years after Jesse Ventura's lawsuit - by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). In August 1999, when Vince McMahon initiated a public stock offering of his WWF, McMahon was required to report the extent of his heavyweight heist. McMahon's SEC filing showed his WWF made more than $250 million in the fiscal year 1998-1999 and in the following year, about $350 million. But the most illuminating financial facts revealed by McMahon's SEC documents were his operating expenses, his business *costs.* McMahon's accounting statements disclosed the WWF's annual *profit margin* was *167% for 1997 and 1998!*

McMahon's enormous profits were (and are) literally unheard of in either the sports or entertainment industries and while Wall Street may have applauded McMahon's *cost controls,* wrestlers were stunned when they learned how little of the WWF's financial pie was allocated to wrestler compensation: the WWF paid its wrestlers *about thirteen percent* of its gross revenues, *while pro baseball, basketball and football paid their performers between 50% and 60% of gross receipts!* And the profit margin enjoyed by McMahon's main competitor at the time - Ted Turner's WCW - was about the same; during the same years, Turner's WCW grossed about $200 million and *turned a profit of about 145%.* Unlike the pay scales for Turner's other *unionized* broadcasting personnel and Atlanta-based sports teams, Turner paid his *nonunion* WCW wrestlers about 20% of his wrestling company's annual revenue. Which is why Ted Turner's TBS loved the wrestling business - it produced higher TV ratings than the Braves or Hawks with substantially lower operating costs; Ted Turner's wrestlers were his *only nonunion employees* in various broadcast companies and sports teams he owned.

Until now, not many persons outside The Business were interested in pro wrestling's *sweat equity* secret, but one was wrestling journalist David Meltzer: "While wrestlers are earning more than ever, *wrestlers' pay is ridiculously below the level of athletes on teams that don't generate anywhere near as much money.* I don't know of any team sport in North America that made a $50 million profit or a $55 million profit year like WCW. While the combined TV package for the NBA, MLB and NFL is far greater than for WWF or WCW, *the amount of income derived from television by either WCW or WWF during the course of a calendar year is far more than any team in North American professional sport.* No matter how much at times we think wrestling has changed because it's bigger, glitzier, the guys are more recognizable and its now in the papers and on the TV news all the time, in its heart, *this is still the same wrestling business that often changes what its product looks like but never changes its heart,'* Meltzer wrote.

Pro wrestling's sweat equity secret raises questions, one of which is why wrestlers *agree* to these compensation practices? When *Forbes* put that question to WWF wrestler Al Snow in 1999, he said: *" You're not totally comfortable with it but you accept certain givens when you get into this business.* This business right now is a lot like Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, when the studios had all the power." Al Snow's wrestling career didn't last very long after his intemperate remark to *Forbes, which concluded, "When it comes to paychecks, muscle-bound pro wrestlers have no leverage"*

No leverage - that's what I'd been talking about for many years but to the wrong audience, apparently. And *Forbes* magazine is hardly an advocate of labor unions or player associations, but their strictly business assessment of pro wrestling from a corporate viewpoint made one conclusion about wrestling economics absolutely clear: *the reason fair compensation practices have not yet come to pro wrestling is because they've not been demanded by wrestlers as a group.* After all these many years, it's still hard to explain to outsiders that from the day a wrestler enters The Game, it's drilled into him that he can't beat the system. Wrestlers learn the hard way that if they don't like what promoters do, too bad - it's their game. This is pro wrestling's cruelest con: *wrestler mistreatment* is an institutionalized abuse of labor unsurpassed by any other

entertainment industry. One might expect market considerations would permit the most skilled and entertaining wrestlers to rise to the top, but the history of pro wrestling is riddled with world champions who were poor *workers* on the one hand, and accomplished *shooters* used as *gebronies,* on the other. *At the core of wrestler abuse is pro wrestling's defining characteristic: the promoters' arbitrary power to select winners and losers.* The promoters' unchallengeable authority to not only write the scripts but decide which wrestlers to *push* and which to use as *jobbers* invites the full range of imaginable abuses.

Wrestlers are told their earnings are determined by the size of the audience their match draws, but a wrestler's audience appeal is manipulated through the hype and scripted match outcome. The truth is a wrestler's ability to attract an audience is confounded by the scriptwriter's decisions about which wrestlers to *push* and which to *put over.* Which is why wrestlers complain about their fates cynically with references to the *power of the pencil*, whose one end has an eraser. Under these conditions - where wrestling's winners are *not* determined by athletic or artistic skills - one might expect cast members to demand equal compensation. But that has not happened, either. Instead, wrestlers fight among themselves for the promoters' favorable decision to *push.*

I'm afraid that *wrestlers are The Game's genuine marks:* they actually believe their ship will come in, if only they are *pushed* and permitted to win. That is part of wrestler culture. And most wrestlers are not around long enough to see The Game for what it is. In the long run, none of the wrestlers wins. After a 16-year career in wrestling, my old friend Zulu (Ron Pope) put it this way: "A wrestler can always *get over* with fans. *Getting over* with the promoter is a lot harder."

Formal contracts were a long time coming to the wrestling industry, and although their emergence was saluted as a positive step of great importance, written contracts were introduced to protect promoters, not wrestlers. Wrestler contracts are written by promoters and their lawyers, and they are one-sided. For example, typical WWF contracts require

wrestlers to perform *any and all* scripts devised by the promotion, which is a way to control wrestlers' star status by the threat of raising or lowering their profile and popularity; thus, wrestlers are required as a condition of employment to sacrifice control over the level of their matches (main event, underneath, middle-of-the-card), their opponents and match outcomes. WWF contracts also require wrestlers to relinquish all rights to their ring name, costume, makeup and likeness, thereby transferring all merchandising rights exclusively to the promotion. In other words, contrary to prevailing practice in other areas of sports entertainment, a wrestler's name and persona belong to the promotion, not the wrestler. As such, wrestlers have no merchandising rights under their own name or likeness, and the promoters' ownership of those merchandising rights may continue after wrestlers are no longer employed by the promotion. Typical wrestler contracts also require wrestlers to assume *all responsibility for ring injuries and even death,* and to absolve and hold the promotion *harmless* for such injury or death, including a specific promise *not to sue* the promotion. Such contracts require wrestlers to assume responsibility for the condition of their bodies, to abide by the promotion's dress code and regulations concerning the time at which they must appear at the arena or at TV taping sessions, and willingly provide periodic urine samples for drug tests (if the promotion decides to administer drug tests).

The questionable legality of these contracts is in their one-sided description of duties and obligations. Although wrestlers' obligations are spelled out in painful detail, few promoter obligations are specified. As several lawyers have noted, wrestler contracts reflect the promoter's superior power to dictate the contract's terms and conditions. About all that is formally required of the promoter is providing wrestlers a fee (sometimes guaranteed, sometimes a *downside guarantee)* which may or may not include a percentage of merchandise revenue. Some wrestler contracts specify a minimum or maximum number of wrestling dates or bookings per year, and some contracts contain a *doing jobs clause* that says wrestlers may be requested to lose (a provision intended to establish control over wrestlers' disinclination to do *jobs).* And when it comes to wrestler injuries, contracts are written to protect the promoter not the body that will require medical attention or the wrestler's family that still has to eat and make monthly house payments; some contracts provide minimum compensation to injured wrestlers for up to six weeks but there are no provisions for

medical insurance or workman's compensation. Finally, most wrestlers are contracted for two or three-year terms with an automatic renewal unless it is terminated by either party; but if or when wrestlers want to terminate their contracts, they are required to provide *notice* (usually 13 weeks), a lengthy period of time that gives the promoter three months *to bury him* on TV - to destroy the wrestler's market value. Nonetheless, wrestlers willingly sign these one-sided agreements and as one insider noted, "Many wrestlers believe everyone is a *mark* to be *worked* except themselves; in many ways, this makes them the biggest *marks* of all, since they are *marks* for themselves."

Not all wrestlers are as stupid as they look or sound. Like Jim Hellwig, for example, who wrestled as the six foot-three, 300 pound Ultimate Warrior in the WWF. Jim was generally dismissed by wrestling insiders as a poor *worker* who gave incoherent interviews and when he became a WWF headliner during the late 1980s, lots of *smart* fans thought Jim Hellwig was just another muscle head whose only *gimmick* was a body produced by chemistry. But then he surprised everyone when he waged a battle with The Business over his treatment. Jim began wrestling for McMahon in 1987 with a two-year contract and automatic one-year renewals and when his face paint and steroid-swollen body *popped* arena attendance around the circuit, Jim asked McMahon to increase his compensation and lessen his workload. Jim figured his wrestling stardom required fair treatment, which meant he should get the same deal as the promotion's other big attraction, Terry Gene Bollea. Jim asked for a million dollars a year and a reduced work schedule, just like Hogan got.

After Jim made his pitch for a new deal, McMahon agreed to pay him 4% to 5% of each arena show's net gate, not to pay another WWF wrestler more than Jim, to increase Jim's royalty rate on merchandise and to provide four days off every other pay period. But a month later, McMahon suspended Jim *for unprofessional conduct* when he missed several arena dates. Months afterward, Jim agreed to another contract that promised to pay him an unspecified amount ("equal to such percentage of the gate

receipts for such events as *is consistent with the nature of the match* in which the wrestler appears, i.e., preliminary bout, main event, etc. and *the prevailing practice of the United States professional wrestling community* and *any standards the promoter or others establish specifically for such event,,*" his contract said). The new contract also promised Jim merchandise royalties of 25% of the WWF's *net* profits on sales of licensed products.

Jim Hellwig thought he had a great deal until the WWF told him to *turn heel* for a match with Hulk Hogan a few months later. Knowing a *heel turn* would *kill* his merchandise sales, Jim refused to *turn,* citing his contract clause that "*"promoters shall* [develop and enhance] . . . *the value of wrestler's performance as professional wrestler with his/her standing in the professional wrestling community, all of which shall inure to the benefit of the wrestler"* Jim argued that *turning heel* would damage his character, not enhance it. When the WWF refused to budge, reminding Jim he was also contractually obligated to "*perform any and all scripts*," he finally agreed to the *heel turn.* But now, Jim added some conditions to his *heel turn* - he wanted reduced bookings so he could pursue an acting career and he asked for exclusive royalty rights to all merchandise sales based on characters and likenesses he portrayed in his acting career with the WWF having no claim on them. In return, Jim agreed to not perform acting characters with a likeness to Ultimate Warrior. According to Jim, McMahon agreed orally to these conditions but refused to confirm the new agreement in writing, and four days later, he was fired again. This time, the WWF said Jim was terminated because he was part of a scheme to distribute human growth hormone (HGH) in WWF locker rooms. After firing him, the WWF continued to use Jim's trademarked "Warrior" and "Ultimate Warrior" names. Denying the HGH allegation, Jim filed suit against the WWF for wrongful termination and copyright infringement and accused McMahon of asking him for a source of HGH when "certain wrestlers and other Titan employees began using (HGH) to circumvent drug policy without detection." Jim said McMahon's own steroid and other controlled substance use was in violation of his own company's drug policy, and he accused McMahon of selective drug enforcement by "punishing certain wrestlers for testing positive for steroids while allowing others to go unpunished."

Jim's lawsuit challenged the legality of WWF compensation provisions: " *Wrestlers under contract with Titan were never told by*

company or its agents the amount of compensation or the percentage of the gate they were to receive - wrestlers learned of the amount of their payment on receipt of the checks," said his lawsuit. Jim began a long and costly legal fight for more than $5 million dollars in unpaid compensation. Ultimately, the court ruled the "Warrior" and "Ultimate Warrior" names belonged to Jim Hellwig, not McMahon or Titan Sports. Jim's other claims were eventually settled out of court in a confidential disposition.

Another WWF wrestling performer sued Vince McMahon in 1999 over unfair treatment and also challenged the legality of wrestling contracts. Sable (Rena Mero) was hired by the WWF in 1996 at about $150,000 a year for her striking beauty and breast implants. Initially, Sable's role was just to walk around the ring as a scantily clad valet for her wrestler-husband (Marc Mero); after she became more popular than her husband, she was told to wear thong underwear and wrestle in women's matches. Sable's involvement in women's matches was essentially an excuse by WWF *bookers* to provide T & A and *accidental nudity,* and her voluptuous appearances spiked TV ratings. When the WWF produced a Sable video, its sales were second only to star wrestler Steve Austin (Steve Williams). Sable's skin act became so popular she was invited by *Playboy* magazine and *TV Guide* to pose for their cameras.

Sable's dispute with McMahon started at a WWF pay-per-view *stripper match,* a *gimmick* event featuring one or both female participants having their clothes ripped off. That PPV-show was a huge financial success, and when Sable learned how much money other wrestlers on the show were paid, she asked for a *payoff* equal to Steve Austin's; Sable claimed she was at least equally responsible for the high buy rate. Sable voiced other complaints, too: although the WWF had made her the women's wrestling champion, she had no training for wrestling and didn't like doing it because of safety concerns - especially, a fear that taking frontal falls and *bumps* would could damage her breast implants. She also had been complaining about the WWF's *creative* content that, in her view, was becoming increasingly "obscene, titillating, vulgar and unsafe" and she

objected to a WWF merchandise catalogue that depicted her in a T-shirt in "a degrading fashion offering sexual favors." Sable also complained that McMahon had turned a blind eye to wrestler steroid abuse and the dangers of roid-rage. After Sable confronted McMahon with her long list of complaints, he had promised to increase her *payoffs*, "clean up" WWF drug abuse by enforcing drug policy and limit her wrestling appearances, she said.

Sometime later, the WWF offered Sable a renewal contract which she did not immediately sign; instead, she continued to criticize the WWF's working conditions which, she said, interfered with her sense of well-being, safety and peace of mind. She said that men routinely walked into her dressing room as if by accident and cut holes in the walls to watch her and other female performers dress; she also voiced objection to "big nipple contests in the locker rooms" among other WWF female employees. About two months later, a few minutes before one of her matches on Long Island, New York, McMahon's TV announcer and office minion Jim Ross confronted Sable with her unsigned contract and demanded an immediate signature before her match (as happened earlier with Jesse Ventura). But Sable refused to sign it when she noticed her renewal contract contained a new provision - an arbitration clause that prevented her from working for WWF competitors should she leave the WWF; Sable asked Ross for time to consult an attorney but when Ross insisted on her immediate signature, she sensed her job was at stake and she signed. Recalling that incident later, she said she felt "intimidated and distracted by preparing for her performance only minutes away."

In the months afterward, Sable was required to enact increasingly provocative scripts and she again argued about her instructions, especially when she was told to perform a lesbian skit and match *finishes* that required her gown to be ripped off, exposing her breasts *by mistake* on national television. Sable didn't like T & A, but she went along with it for awhile. At about this time, Sable was invited to pose for another photo shoot for a second *Playboy* cover and centerfold for which she was offered about $850,000. An earlier *Playboy* shoot paid her about $200,000 in a deal brokered by the WWF; this time, *Playboy* said it wanted to deal directly with Rena Mero, cutting out the WWF as middleman. But when McMahon learned of Sable's second *Playboy* deal, he demanded a cut of Sable' fee

because he held the copyright to Rena's wrestling name - Sable. When Sable argued about splitting her fee with McMahon, the WWF threatened to stop the *Playboy* deal, legally. Then Sable asked for a release from her three-year WWF contract and McMahon agreed to let her go, but insisted on a non- compete agreement so she couldn't work for Turner's WCW or any other wrestling promotion for two years nor could she use the Sable name in the future.

While still arguing about the conditions of her release, the WWF instructed Sable to *drop* her women's world championship belt on national TV one night in May 1999. Sable objected to losing the *strap* on TV and performing another *evening gown* match that required her stripping down to her underwear; she thought the WWF intended to humiliate her and televise her degradation nationally. Just before that scheduled match, Sable scribbled a brief addendum to her contract in her dressing room: *"Because we disagree about the fashion I would lose my belt, and because of my concerns of humiliation and safety, it is agreed that* I appear tonight solely upon your contractual assurance that I will not lose my gown nor wrestle, and that the girl with whom I am interfacing agrees with her role. My appearance [tonight] shall be no more than parading in the ring and shall not include wrestling." Sable also added a few lines that said until her WWF contractual concerns were resolved, "neither I nor the WWF, its employees or subcontractors shall speak disparagingly about the other, scripted or unscripted."

Sable wanted her title loss to occur at another WWF event that wasn't televised (as had been done with other WWF champions, she said) so she wouldn't "be exposed to further degradation." But McMahon told her if she didn't wrestle that night, her fans would be disappointed and her contract violated. Sable stood fast, refusing to lose unless a special contract was written that promised that her loss would occur in a safe manner and without "any disparaging WWF conduct." McMahon told Sable she was acting like a prima donna and *the WWF would move on to its next queen.* Sable finally agreed to lose her title that night on national TV, but during her match, the TV commentary by Jerry Lawler and Shawn Michaels included this broadcast exchange: *"Do you think she is horizontally accessible?" "She is accessible every which way from what I hear,"* was the reply; when Sable stood in the ring holding a microphone, one WWF

TV announcer said, *"She certainly seems comfortable with that microphone up at her mouth like that"*

After Sable lost that night, the WWF pulled her merchandise, canceled her future appearances and sent her a letter announcing it had suspended use of the Sable name. Soon afterward, Sable found her travel bag and other personal effects in the dressing room smeared with human feces, she said. A few weeks later, Sable filed a lawsuit against the WWF, alleging: "The WWF controls its performers through a carefully designed program of intimidation and humiliation, including scripted sexual provocation (in and out of the ring) and staged stunts that are inherently dangerous under contracts that absolve the WWF of all responsibility" Sable's suit also challenged the legality of wrestler contracts: "The WWF encumbers athletes with unconscionable one-sided contracts which control their star status by the threat of raising and lowering their profile at will, underpaying gifted athletes far below their worth for a sport that has become increasingly dangerous without controls"

Sable's $140 million lawsuit produced headlines around the country but most of that media interest was tied to Sable's erotic celebrity, not the legal principles she was fighting for. I don't know Rena Mero and wasn't one of her fans, but she earned my respect when she told *USA Today:* "*People do not realize that wrestling has no regulations. No state control. No federal control. No union"* Later, when I got a chance to examine her court papers, I admired the stand she took even more - her lawsuit against the WWF spoke for not only herself *but all other wrestling performers:* "Wrestlers are bound to the WWF by unconscionable contracts of adhesion, and are *precluded from wrestling for any competing organization*, the WWF has and will continue to *abuse its wrestlers (including holding down their income below competitive market rates), and the wrestlers are forced to perform under dangerous* and vulgar conditions controlled by the WWF." Sable's lawsuit was not filed as a class-action suit representing all wrestlers, but it sure sounded like one. Lost in the celebration of Sable's glitter and skin was an appreciation of the irony: this sultry bombshell woman wrestler had the *balls* to tell the legal world about the abusive treatment of *all* the *boys!* Courage was Rena Mero's only unnoticed attribute.

Rena settled her case out of court quietly in August 1999 with both sides agreeing to keep the terms of the settlement confidential. But when

Playboy proceeded with plans to publish its second Sable cover and centerfold, the always litigious WWF sued *Playboy* for copyright violation and demanded a percentage of revenue produced by Sable's photographs. That suit also was settled quietly out of court.

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Most pro wrestling performers never approach the stardom of Jesse "The Body" Ventura or Ultimate Warrior or even Sable. At the other far end of wrestling's talent spectrum are undercard performers - mid-level wrestlers and *gebronies. Jobbers.* There are a lot more of them scattered around the country than main event stars, and they often are beaten up in more ways than one. Wrestling's *gebronies* usually are not offered contracts of any kind; instead, they are hired on a weekly or monthly basis when wrestling shows are staged in their hometown's geographical area. Wrestling's *jobbers* are often young guys, just entering The Business but already seduced by the bright lights and dollies and a few minutes of attention. Their only duty is to lose to other wrestlers who are being *pushed,* but they also struggle against wrestling's unfair and unsafe working conditions.

One of these *gebronies* was Steve DeBlasio who was instructed to take a *bump* from the top rope in a 1983 West Palm Beach match. He followed instructions because he was told he'd be fired if he didn't. But his scripted *bump* caused a badly crushed ankle that ended his wrestling career and left him with hefty medical bills. DeBlasio sued, and although the jury found that *booker* Dusty Rhodes was negligent in "designing a dangerous script," the jury decided that DeBlasio "assumed the risk of injury" by agreeing to participate. In the end, the jury judged the defunct Florida NWA promotion and DeBlasio's opponent Les Thornton to be liable, and awarded DeBlasio $317,000.

Although wrestlers do not expect to get injured in the ring, the physical character of *working* means that injuries inevitably occur because of careless maneuvers and mistakes. The wrestling industry's cavalier attitude about unscripted *bumps* is not well known outside The Business, but wrestlers soon learn that if they get hurt, it's their problem and any medical

mopping up is their own responsibility. Which is another reason why promoters insist wrestlers are *independent contractors* - a legal classification that gets promoters off the hook for providing the usual worker benefits; the law says *employers* are not legally obligated to provide insurance for *independent contractors,* only *employees.* Promoters tell wrestlers if they get hurt, there's no one to blame except themselves. If injured wrestlers are lucky, the promotion may keep them on a reduced payroll for a brief period of time, but medical and hospital expenses are borne by the injured wrestler. In other words, *"Wrestling is fake and if you get hurt in a fake sport, that's your fault!"*

One of the WWF's *gebronies* in 1990 was Charles Austin, former linebacker for the University of North Carolina football team. Austin made the mistake of his life when he decided to become a pro wrestler. In December 1990, he wrestled in a WWF tag team match at the Tampa Sun Dome and he never walked again. As an inexperienced *jobber,* his role that night was to lose in a *squash match.* His tag team partner was Shawn Michaels and the script called for Austin to be pinned after taking a maneuver called the Rocker Dropper executed by one of his opponents (Marty Janetty). Austin was supposed to take the *bump* face-first, but instead landed on his neck. While Austin laid motionless on the mat, the other wrestlers thought he was dead; to quickly finish the match, Janetty turned Austin over, leaped from the top rope and splashed him for the pin. The videotaped match was so violent, it never aired on TV.

Austin was paralyzed for months but eventually regained feeling in his arms and legs although no control of bodily functions. Three years later, Austin sued the WWF for $7 million. In court, WWF defense attorneys argued that since pro wrestling is potentially dangerous, its practitioners necessarily assume risk when they agree to participate. But Austin's attorneys argued the inexperienced Austin had only six months of training and was without necessary experience to perform a dangerous move. The Florida jury didn't buy the WWF's defense, and it found the WWF 90% negligent and Janetty 5% negligent and Austin 5% negligent, awarding Austin $26.7 million dollars. A few months later, the judgment was reduced in out-of-court negotiations to about $10 million, virtually all paid by the WWF's insurance company.

Another tragic story about pro wrestling's working conditions involves Darren Drosdov, a collegiate football star at the University of Maryland who later played two seasons with the Denver Broncos. He became a pro wrestler in 1997 and two years later, was performing a routine wrestling maneuver in a match with D-Lo Brown at a WWF event at the Nassau Coliseum. But the maneuver was botched and Darren landed on his head, fracturing his neck. At age 30, Darren was paralyzed below the waist and rushed into a three-hour emergency surgery during which bone was taken from his hip to repair his broken neck. A month later, he underwent additional surgery involving inter- body fusion with plates and screws to realign his vertebrae and stabilize his neck fracture. Afterward, Darren still had no lower body movement and his upper body movement remained limited. Later, Darren sued and his legal proceedings are still in progress.

Some say pro wrestling's primitive working conditions were ultimately exposed in May 1999 before 14,000 wrestling fans at Kansas City's Kemper Arena with millions more watching on pay-per-view TV. Owen Hart was certainly no *gebroney* but just prior to a WWF championship match *that he was supposed to win,* Owen was strapped into an out-of-date belted harness rigged with long cables tied to the arena ceiling for a dramatic stunt: a spectacular overhead ring entrance from above the crowd. As Owen was lowered from the ceiling, he slipped out of the harness about 90 feet above the ring; in free fall, Owen Hart landed headfirst on a turnbuckle and flopped like a ragdoll into the ring. As the arena audience stood in stunned silence, Owen's face turned white and then grey, purple and blue. After banging on Owen's chest, Kansas City paramedics wheeled Owen's lifeless body backstage. At 33, Owen Hart died shortly after impact from internal bleeding from a ruptured aorta and broken neck. And McMahon's pay-per-view wrestling show continued, of course, without pausing to explain to the audience what had happened.

Owen's death made front page headlines around the country the following morning and afterward, Owen's family lashed out at Vince McMahon. Owen's wrestling brother Bret Hart said Owen had been uneasy about doing the stunt "but got talked into doing it." Bret added: "We take our falls on the mat, inside the ring. I was never a stuntman, and my brother Owen was never a stuntman." Bruce Hart, another brother, said: "They've lost sight of what The Business is. *It's become nothing but a fucked up*

contest for ratings. You don't see John Elway or Wayne Gretsky coming from the balcony" When the Governor of Minnesota was asked his reaction, Jesse Ventura said wrestling was getting out of control and if they wanted to do stuntman *spots,* then wrestlers should be trained as stuntmen and join the stuntmen's union; when asked to respond to Jesse's remarks, Vince McMahon said Jesse had been out of The Business a long time and wasn't up to speed on current conditions.

But Owen's death produced rare public outrage - rare for pro wrestling. A spokesman at the Center for Media and Public Affairs said wrestling had "gone from something laughable to something dangerous." *Montreal Gazette* sports editor Dave Stubbs predicted that after pro wrestling spent a few days mourning Owen's death, "it will again tear off its blouses to expose its brassieres, encourage delinquent behavior and draw blood with folding metal chairs and garbage pails." Perceptively, Stubbs added "the business that was [Owen Hart's] life and death will learn nothing from it. That is the greatest tragedy of all." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* jumped into the controversy, saying wrestlers "are being exploited, asked to do increasingly perilous stunts, asked to sell their bodies at auction. Some of them reply, 'Yeah, but the money's good.' In the end, all that gets you is a fancier coffin." And the *Wrestling Observer's* David Meltzer criticized wrestlers' *failure to unionize* when he wrote: "The human costs have escalated totally out of control. The rehab visits, the near fatal car crashes, the overdoses and the flukes are way out of hand . . . the wrestlers, more than ever before, are *pawns of an ugly system with no insurance, no collective bargaining and unsafe working conditions.*"

Weeks later, Owen Hart's widow filed a lawsuit against McMahon's WWF and other parties connected with the equipment used in the stunt, claiming an unsafe work environment. In response, the WWF denied responsibility and made public a copy of Owen's wrestling contract in a feeble attempt to legitimate its ridiculous claim. Owen's WWF contract showed Owen had formally acknowledged his "performance in a professional wrestling exhibition *may be dangerous* and *may involve the risk of serious bodily injury"* but he "knowingly and freely *assumes full responsibility* for all such inherent risks *as well as those due to the negligence of the promotion, other wrestlers, or otherwise*." Another clause in Owen's contract said he had agreed to *"release, waive and discharge the*

promotion from all liability " and promise not to sue the WWF for any injury "*or even in the event of his own death*." In other words, the WWF implied, Owen Hart's death was a voluntary act of self destruction - a *suicide* for which the promotion had no responsibility or liability.

Nobody bought that argument, of course, even in pro wrestling. Months later, McMahon's WWF settled out of court with Owen's widow for $18 million dollars. When CNN's *Larry King Live* discussed Owen's death with Hulk Hogan, Hogan was asked his view of Vince McMahon. Hogan said: "I have a lot of respect for how he's taken care of his family. As far as him as a businessman - *his theme of ride the horse until it drops, shoot it, then eat the horse -1 don't agree with*"

At about this time, another dimension of pro wrestling's working conditions was exposed more broadly than ever before - *blading* - when wrestlers are instructed to cut themselves with razor blades to produce *juice.* This particular industry practice probably was first revealed by *New York Daily Mirror* columnist Dan Parker in the early 1950s; about thirty years later, Eddie Mansfield demonstrated how "red turns to green" during our famous exposé broadcast by ABC- TV's *20/20.* But, as Eddie Mansfield had warned, *gigging* is dangerous and has to be done carefully. Bleeding to death was never in any wrestling script, even in *hardcore wrestling.*

But that is what nearly happened to wrestler Erich Kulas in November 1996. Then age 17, Erich was a 350-pound wrestling *gebroney* invited at the last minute by Extreme Championship Wrestling to sub for another wrestler who no-showed. Before his match, Erich was asked by his opponent New Jack (Jerome Young) if he would agree to *juice,* and when Erich agreed, New Jack offered to do the cutting since Erich had never *gigged* himself before. When the time came for *juice* during the match, New Jack pulled out an Xacto-blade and put it alongside Erich's forehead; at that moment, the inexperienced Erich suddenly moved his head and caused the *blade* to slice deeply, hitting an artery. Blood gushed from Erich's forehead like a water faucet. Afterward, the wound required 50 stitches and it took 25 minutes to clean the ring canvas before the wrestling

show could continue. Those who were there, or saw the videotape, said it was pro wrestling's ugliest incident of the entire decade. Later, Erich filed a civil suit against the promoters and others, claiming permanent injuries. When offered an out-of-court settlement, Erich declined. "I chose not to take it," he said; "I am out to get them. I am out to close them down." But Erich Kulas didn't close down wrestling and, in fact, he later returned to it. Four years later, Erich wrestled another show at the same Wonderland Greyhound Park, which was advertised: *"Will History Repeat Itself ?"* Two years afterward in May 2002, Erich Kulas, 22, was found dead at his home in Cranston, Rhode Island.

Pro wrestling's use of razor blades has been criticized for many years. More than 20 years ago, a California NAACP investigation of racism in wrestling was especially revolted by how blood is produced and used to excite the crowd. In its 1979 report to the California Athletic Commission, the NAACP said: " *The most barbaric aspect of the* [wrestling] *business is . . . requiring that wrestlers cut themselves in the ring* . . . If a wrestler refuses, he won't be given work. [We] doubt that the Humane Society would allow such a cruel practice on dogs, cats, race horses or any other kind of four-legged performer, and the commission shouldn't allow it with human beings." The California Athletic Commission ignored the recommendation but at least three other state athletic commissions later banned razor blades in wrestling - the commissions of Maryland, Oregon and Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania blade ban was instigated by an incident one night in 1987 when Philadelphia athletic commissioner James J. Binns was seated at ringside for an NWA event at which Wahoo McDaniel *gigged* himself and got the *blade* lodged in his forehead. In the locker room after the match, Binns asked questions and when he learned how blood was produced, he was outraged. "Why? Because I think it's degrading to the wrestlers involved and could have an adverse impact upon the crowd. I think it's very unseemly. I mean we don't allow cockfighting. And I certainly don't think you can place the dignity of a human being below a cock," Binns said later. "I told the wrestlers that I will not allow them to be subjected to that when they come to Pennsylvania. And if the promoter insists on it, they can tell the promoter to go fuck himself," Binns added. A few months later, Binns resigned his position with the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission after the state legislature voted to deregulate wrestling. The next week, *blade jobs* returned to pro wrestling in Pennsylvania.

Another state athletic commission that prohibited *juicing* was the Oregon Boxing and Wrestling Commission in 1988. Afterward, Oregon wrestlers complained they'd now have to get blood *the hard way.* Unaccustomed to strict athletic commission regulation during his family's 65 years of wrestling promotion in Oregon, NWA promoter Don Owen took a dim view of the commission's regulatory zeal; he wanted the Commission to do something useful - to stop Vince McMahon's abundant TV shows and prevent him from promoting those big, monthly arena shows in the

northwest, for example. Eight months after Oregon's *blade* ban, the Athletic Commission's authority was tested by the Owen promotion in a gutsy showdown. In a November 1988 interview on Owen's wrestling show on Portland's KPTV-TV, wrestler Matt Borne promised viewers the next Portland arena show would feature blood! Borne said, "The Commission had better be there because there will be blood all over the place!" Faithful to his promise, Borne *gigged* himself at the next Portland show after his opponent Steve Doll posted him in their main event grudge match. With Borne's blood splattered across the ring, the referee stopped the match in accord with Commission rules. Three days later, the Oregon Commission convened an emergency meeting to consider Owen's disregard of the *blade* ban. Owen denied wrongdoing, claiming no knowledge of Borne's *blade job* - "he's an *independent contractor"* Owen groused. Another state, Maryland, banned the *blade* a few years later and the Maryland Athletic Commission actually stopped wrestling matches that featured blood.

When boxer Tommy Morrison tested positive for HIV in 1996, the *Miami Herald* quoted an unnamed pro wrestler as saying, "Tommy Morrison's out of the ring lifestyle consisted of a lot of women and unprotected sex. That happens a lot in wrestling. TV creates a superstar, and when you travel a good bit, different women throw themselves at you and the temptations are there. And then you go get in the ring the next night and someone in the same situation and open to the same temptations you are with the possibility of either planned or unplanned bloodshed." But the advent of AIDS hasn't stop *blading,* either, and *juicing* continues today as an industry practice. And although blood is no longer routinely scripted for TV wrestling during prime time (except when ratings are down), *juice* remains a staple of pay-per-view events billed as *Cage Matches* or *Hardcore Matches,* which are wrestling's promotional euphemisms for saying "You will see blood!" On shows staged by smaller, independent promotions, wrestlers are virtually always instructed to *gig* themselves, which is often the entire basis of these promotion's *hardcore* cult appeal. Pro wrestling's continuing demand that its performers *juice* as a condition of employment is cruel and abusive, and if young Erich Kulas accomplished nothing else in his short life, his brief, bloody appearance on the wrestling scene in front of a small audience at least served notice to the larger world that it was missing something important by not taking wrestling seriously.

Some pro wrestling secrets are more horrible than others. Apart from revelations about wrestlers' unfair compensation and dangerous working conditions, pro wrestling's most repulsive secret was exposed repeatedly in the 1990s - *its terrible drug problem.* After the steroid epidemic of the 1980s, wrestling's drug cornucopia enlarged to dangerous levels of cocaine, pain-killer and amphetamine abuse in the 1990s. This is perhaps pro wrestling history's saddest chapter, one that more fully reveals the nature of wrestlers' work environment than any of its other exposed secrets.

The first visible hint of the industry's drug problem came in 1986 when Texas wrestler Gino Hernandez (Charles Wolfe) was found dead from cocaine overdose; while Gino was buried at a Houston cemetery, some of his better paid opponents complained their nightly *payoffs* barely covered their daily cocaine expenses. But Gino's death brought into focus a cold, cruel actuarial fact: *after automobile accidents and heart attacks, the next leading cause of death among wrestlers was drug overdose.* Of 11 wrestler deaths between 1984 and 1986, probably half involved drugs. And one can only guess how many automobile accidents and other incidents such as barroom brawls and fights with fans were drug-related. After a second wave of bad publicity about wrestler drug abuse in 1987 (when wrestlers Hacksaw Jim Duggan and Iron Sheik were arrested for possession of small amounts of marihuana and cocaine), Vince McMahon began drug-testing for cocaine.

Half of McMahon's wrestlers flunked the first test and later that year, the WWF suspended both Hawk (Michael He strand) and Davey Boy Smith after they failed drug tests. But WWF drug enforcement was selective and it sometimes ignored wrestlers who cheated on drug tests by submitting somebody else's urine, as happened when Syd Justice (Syd Eudy) was caught using a *designated pisser.* After the Zahorian trial in 1991 and mounting pressure from Phil Mushnick of the *New York Post,* the WWF started testing for steroids. At the same time, Ted Turner's WCW ignored wrestlers' drug problems until Jake Roberts's cocaine habit caused him to show up late for his matches in no condition to wrestle, and WCW began

steroid testing in early 1993 when half its wrestlers flunked the first test although nobody was fired because the company had no steroid policy. In June 1993, WCW formally prohibited illegal (unprescribed) steroid use and other drugs such as HGH and food supplements containing illegal substances, or abuse of prescription drugs.

Although outsiders saluted the advent of drug testing in pro wrestling, the problem of drugs in wrestling was larger: taking samples of wrestler urine ignored the *reasons* for wrestler drug abuse - in some ways, the same predisposing conditions found among other athletes and entertainers. In pro wrestling, however, certain additional factors operate. Although it is staged, pro wrestling is hard on the body and hard on the lifestyle. The physical character of *working* means most wrestlers live with pain, especially in the joints and lower back. Most wrestlers routinely carry painkillers in their shaving kits, along with the bandages, razor blades and Mycitracin for *juicing* wounds. Chronic discomfort creates a need for pharmaceutical help and so does the career requirement that wrestlers put on a spectacular performance every night of the week, often after hours and hours and hundreds of miles of travel. In addition, wrestlers' life on the road leaves plenty of spare time and money for short-term amusement. What do young men away from home do with their extra time and money? They party, and often party with chemicals. In earlier times, beer and marihuana were the substances of choice, but by the late 1980s, cocaine was as popular among wrestlers as elsewhere in entertainment and sport.

As a consequence of ignoring the conditions in wrestling that caused drug abuse, wrestling's drug-testing programs had little or no effect on wrestler drug abuse, as was unfortunately documented by wrestling's grim death toll which began at about the same time. The growing wave of wrestler deaths raised new questions about pro wrestlers' work environment.

Kerry von Erich (Kerry Gene Adkisson) was one of the youngest NWA world heavyweight champions in its history, an honor facilitated by his father Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) who was a member of the NWA's board of directors. Kerry's drug use was well known inside The Business

but wasn't revealed publicly until his drug arrests made the newspapers in Texas. On at least one occasion in 1992, Kerry's drug use caused a police raid at a wrestling arena in St. Louis where wrestlers' gym bags were searched; that same night, unknown to the police, Kerry was undergoing treatment at the Betty Ford Center. About a year later, Kerry was indicted on cocaine possession charges and later that day in February 1993, Kerry went to his father's ranch, borrowed his dad's .44-caliber Magnum handgun and jeep, and went for a ride on the ranch. His dead body was found a few hours later. Kerry, age 33, shot himself in the heart.

A few months later, wrestler "Lethal" Larry Cameron, 41, collapsed during a match in Germany and died of a heart attack; German promoters kept Larry's death quiet because he was a steroid user. In May 1994, my old friend Ray "Candyman" Candy (Ray Canty), 43, died of an apparent heart attack. At six feet four and about 300 pounds, Ray had wrestled with the promotion that Thunderbolt Patterson and I started in Georgia. A few months after Ray's death, Mohammed the Butcher, a 27-year old 400 pound wrestler, died suddenly of an apparent heart attack. Nine months later, Art "Love Machine" Barr, 28, died in his bed at home in Eugene, Oregon the day before Thanksgiving; Art's autopsy revealed bloodstream evidence of prescription drugs and alcohol and a search of his house found bottles of Valium, Halcion and the Mexican version of Percodan.

About a month after Vince McMahon's steroid trial in 1995, wrestler Eddie Gilbert, 33, died in his sleep in a Puerto Rico hotel. Eddie's death was officially attributed to a heart attack but an autopsy found evidence of recent cocaine use. One month after Eddie Gilbert's death, former wrestler Big John Studd (John William Minton) died from liver cancer at age 46. Once six feet seven and 320 pounds, John battled Hodgkin's disease for 17 months. During an 18-year wrestling career, John admitted using both steroids and Human Growth Hormone, which he later blamed for accelerating the onset of Hodgkin's. The deaths of Eddie Gilbert and John Studd marked a cruel postscript to wrestling's two steroid trials of the 1990s: *both* were customers of *the wrestlers' pharmacist* Dr. George Zahorian. Two months after Eddie Gilbert was found dead, ABC-TV's *Wide World of Sports* broadcast "Requiem for the Heavyweights" which focused on three recent wrestler deaths - Art Barr, Gilbert and John Studd. Eddie's former wife Missy Hyatt (Melissa Hiatt) said: "WCW doesn't care because

they can take anyone, put some paint on his face and call him the Ultimate Surprise." An unnamed WCW wrestler said, "I know there are random tests, but all the *boys* are still using them. I don't know how they get away with it."

About a month later, Vince McMahon announced a new WWF drug policy that prohibited marihuana and required wrestlers using pain-killers to show their prescriptions. Afterward, some wrestlers complained the new drug policy would turn most of them into alcoholics, that the new policy was written by somebody who didn't understand wrestlers' occupational requirements to take *bumps* and constantly travel across time zones without sleep. Wrestling journalist David Meltzer warned, "Let's face it: the more physically demanding fans want the profession to be, the more pain killers are going to be used, and so are amphetamines so long as wrestlers are required to continuously travel." Meltzer concluded, "Drug use of some sort is inevitable as long as we have pro wrestling as we know it."

Dynamite Kid (Thomas Billington) was one of wrestling's superstars in the 1980s. By wrestling standards, Tom was small at five feet eight and 175 pounds but he compensated for his size by regularly injecting testosterone. Tom became one of wrestling's style innovators, introducing high flying *bumps* - he let his opponents suplex him over the top rope to concrete floors, and he performed knee drops off of cages and other backward *bumps* off the top rope onto arena floors. Tom's moves were spectacular and predictably painful. To deal with the chronic pain, he ate painkillers while he became nationally famous in the mid-1980s with his cousin Davey Boy Smith as the WWF's British Bulldogs tag team. When Tom's body began to fail him at age 25, he was deeply in debt on house and car payments and hadn't saved enough money to retire. Like most wrestlers, Tom Billington lived fast and high and spent his money as soon as he got it. About two years later, he suffered a career-ending back injury in a championship tag team match in Hamilton, Ontario. Tom and Davey Boy were supposed to win a title defense against Don Muraco and Bob Orton, but when Tom leaped over Muraco after a drop-down, Tom's spine collapsed as he hit the

mat and he crumpled in pain. Unable to move his legs, Tom laid still in the middle of the ring while arena fans chanted “bullshit” and screamed “phoney.” The other wrestlers stood and watched as he rolled himself out of the ring and the referee changed the *finish*, counting Tom out. Finally, Tom was loaded into an ambulance and taken to a local hospital where he underwent a six hour emergency surgery to repair two ruptured discs. Tom’s doctors told him to look for another line of work, medical advice that Tom never shared with anyone.

When WWF officials learned Tom was in a wheelchair and hadn’t regained feeling in his foot, he was ordered to wrestle one more match to drop the tag team *strap* in Tampa a few weeks later. When Tom’s plane landed in Tampa, he was put in another wheelchair and helped off the plane. At the arena, Tom popped more pills and linked arms with his tag partner Davey Smith, who helped him to the ring. As agreed, the tag team *straps* were dropped in a match that ended quickly and Tom was carried back to the dressing room. As Vince McMahon paid him $25 for that night’s TV taping, McMahon said, “God Bless you, Dynamite”. Tom returned home to Canada for more recuperation but a few months later he was in financial straits again. About to lose his home, he asked McMahon to loan him $10,000; to pay off McMahon’s loan, Tom agreed to wrestle at the 1987 Pontiac Silverdome *Wrestlemania.* Although not fully recovered, Tom agreed to work a six man tag team match which Tom’s team would lose for a one-night *payoff* of $20,000, enough to settle his debt to McMahon. As agreed, Tom’s team lost and when he got his *payoff,* McMahon’s loan was already subtracted from it.

Afterward, Tom returned to physical therapy and a steady diet of painkillers. And wrestling. Four years later when he was 32, he overdosed on pills and nearly died. Doctors said his years of steroid use left black scars on his heart and he was told to stop using drugs and stop wrestling. One doctor told him, *“You see, when you were taking these steroids and working out., it wasn’t just your biceps and triceps that got bigger - your heart got bigger, too, because that’s a muscle as well”* Although he could not perform wrestling moves without drugs to ease the pain, Tom appeared in a few *comeback* matches in 1996 when he was 33. A year later, Tom’s back and legs were so crippled he couldn’t climb stairs and in a few months, he couldn’t walk. Doctors told Tom he’d never walk again. At age

38, former wrestling champion Dynamite Kid was put in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

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Pro wrestling's macabre body count continued into 1996: at six feet-four and 267 pounds, Neil Superior (Neil Caricofe) had wrestled for seven years with independent promotions in Maryland and West Virginia. At 33, Neil suddenly died one night when he collapsed in a parking lot; his autopsy showed the cause of death was toxic poisoning from a combination of alcohol and three bodybuilding drugs - ephedrine, anabolic steroids and gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB). About 12 months later, another huge, steroided wrestler dropped dead: Jeep Swenson, six feet four and 400 pounds, died of a heart attack at age 40; he had wrestled against Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage on a WCW pay-per-view show about a year before he died when he openly admitted steroid use to his pals at Gold's Gym in Venice, California where he was a regular. Two months after Swenson's death, Brian Pillman, 35, was found dead in his room at the Budgetel Motel in Bloomington, Minnesota; the official cause of death was heart attack but police found bottles of prescription drugs in his room - muscle relaxers and painkillers. Brian had played pro football with the Cincinnati Bengals in 1984 but was traded to Buffalo Bills, where he was cut in training camp when his steroid use was discovered. After playing in the Canadian football League in 1986, he broke his ankle and went into pro wrestling where he struggled with problems caused by alcohol and painkillers, routinely crashing rental cars while on the road. A few months before he died, his WWF drug test found both painkillers and traces of Deca-Durabolin, an anabolic steroid; after his death, Brian's drug records showed he was taking daily injections of HGH as well as heavy doses of painkillers and Deca-Durabolin in the last 18 months of his life. And cocaine. Afterward, his widow Melanie talked openly about wrestling and painkillers: "If you take a couple, more than the 'one-to- two as directed,' you get a euphoric, lovely happy, pain-free, now-I- can-go-to-sleep feeling. *This feeling is a godsend to wrestlers. Most wrestlers, at least the top guys, work 200-plus dates a year, nuoving from town to town with no time off for*

any injuries in an industry where a broken nose is looked at as a stubbed toe by promoters. The injuries are intense - performers can get overly caught up in the moment and accidentally hurt each other easier than you think," she said.

Four months after Brian Pillman died, Louie Spicolli (Louis Mucciolo) was found dead on the floor of his San Pedro, California home, face down in a pool of vomit. He was 27. The official cause of death was the same is Brian Pillman's - atherosclerotic hypertrophic cardiomyopathy syndrome - but an empty vial of testosterone and a bottle of Xanax tablets was found near his body. Afterward, friends said the night before he died, Spicolli drank a lot of wine and popped 26 somas; Louie routinely took about 25 to 30 somas each day, either for pain or recreation. In the days after Spicolli's death, WCW officials said he'd been drug-tested twice, passing both times because he had prescriptions for the drugs found in his urine.

After the deaths of Brian Pillman and Louie Spicolli, an angry Dave Meltzer used his *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* to call for help: "*Prescription pain killers have become the most lethal potential problem facing The Business.* In the past 13 years, pro wrestling, which has far fewer people involved in its ranks than all the collegiate wrestling programs in America, has had *17 deaths that could be loosely related to problems with drugs or alcohol.* Will anyone learn a lesson from this? The previous 16 didn't seem to make a hell of a lot of difference . . . If you were looking in from the outside, you'd be in horror at a profession where the death of a 27 year-old has become an almost acceptable routine. If this happened in the NFL or NBA with this kind of frequency, you could only imagine the media outcry."

Stunned by wrestling's growing body count, Meltzer compared its death rate with other mortality statistics in both the general population and in professional sport. His calculations showed "the *death rate among active pro wrestlers during this six year period is 975% higher - 11 times greater than that of the average segment of society.* This is equivalent to eight major league baseball players during a season or 14 NFL players dead in a season or 16 Division I Basketball players or 105 Division I football players during one season." Meltzer concluded, "This is a business for the most part without heart or conscience and a fan base that for the most part sees

performers as their fantasy monkeys to jump through hoops and entertain them and *not as human beings.*"

Junkyard Dog (Sylvester Ritter) achieved a level of success that was rare for black wrestlers, but seven years after he left The Business he became another of its casualties. Sylvester began wrestling in 1977 and while working before southern crowds in Louisiana and Mississippi, he was given the tag Junkyard Dog lifted from Jim Croce's *Bad, Bad LeRoy Brown.* In 1984, as part of Vince McMahon's national assault on regional promotions, Sylvester went to the WWF where he earned big money for awhile but spent most of it on cocaine which ultimately ruined his career and left him penniless. After four years in the WWF, Sylvester was no-showing dates and he was fired; by now, his personal life was a mess, having married several times and losing his home, cars and jewelry. Three years later, Turner's WCW hired him and he made several unsuccessful attempts to kick his drug habit. When he was fired again, he moved in with friends and worked in their repossession agency. In June 1998, on the way to his daughter's high school graduation, Sylvester crashed his car, rolling it three times near Forrest, Mississippi. Junkyard Dog died broke at age 45.

A few months after Junkyard Dog died, the other half of the British Bulldogs tag team, Davey Boy Smith (David Smith), went public with his addiction to painkillers. Davey was another guy too small for wrestling at five feet ten, but he bulked up to 265 with chemical help. As a stocky, muscular strongman, he gained wrestling notoriety for his ability to suplex the largest men in wrestling. By April 1999, Davey was struggling with knee and back problems caused by his 20-year ring career. Although doctors had recommended back surgery ten years earlier, Davey declined and continued to fight off his chronic pain by eating Xanax, Percoset, Demerol and eventually morphine. He continued to wrestle but no longer took *bumps.* Then Davey fractured his spine in a 1998 WCW match in Winston-Salem. Unaware of the seriousness of his injury, Davey continued to wrestle by increasing his dosage of painkillers. Finally, Davey was so

crippled he couldn't perform and went home to rest and recuperate. While on leave, WCW cut his salary 30%.

At home, Davey continued eating painkillers, but his zombie-like vegetative state worried his wife and kids. To shock him into reality, Davey's wife Diana intentionally swallowed 100 Xanax to show Davey he was going down the same path of three friends - Brian Pillman, Louie Spicolli and Jeep Swenson. A few days later, Davey checked himself into a rehab clinic but rehab did not remove his spinal pain, and he returned to the hospital for more tests. At about this time, Turner's WCW asked him to appear at a TV taping to do an interview; Davey agreed, but days later was hospitalized again and this time, his treatment included the same painkillers that led to Davey's initial addiction. Shortly after Davey returned home from the hospital, WCW mailed him a termination letter. Meanwhile, he was placed in a body cast to treat his fractured upper back and two crushed vertebrae. His family prayed he would not spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, like his tag team partner Tom Billington. For two years, Davey was in and out of rehab programs and his wife finally filed for divorce. Shortly afterward, Davey was hospitalized again for morphine addiction. Davey Boy Smith suddenly died of a heart attack at age 39 in May 2002.

Ravishing Rick Rude (Richard Erwin Rood) became the 25th wrestler death in six years and the sixth wrestler death in 1999. Rick was found dead at his Atlanta home, where empty prescription bottles were found nearby. The official cause of Rick's death at age 40 was a heart attack and brain injuries attributed to a probably accidental overdose of painkillers and sedatives. But Rick's enlarged heart, like that of Brian Pillman and Louie Spicolli, fueled locker room talk about steroids and HGH; nobody knew if Rick used HGH, but everybody knew he used lots of steroids as well as Parabolin and Primobolon.

Rick had reluctantly testified about his steroid use at both wrestling steroid trials, and his own history with steroids was well known. He had stopped steroid use in 1990 when he and his wife decided to have a baby, but after he lost weight and became less muscular, he was fired by Vince

McMahon's WWF. With about a year left on his WWF contract, he joined a small independent circuit of wrestlers appearing before a few hundred fans each night. In the locker room at one of these shows, he told other wrestlers the reason he left the WWF. One of the *boys* who heard Rick's story was Jerry Lawler, who talked about it later: "Rick Rude said they absolutely fired him because he got off steroids. He said he personally had a talk with Vince McMahon, and he [Rude] said, 'Man, I wish I had it on tape.' Vince said, 'You need to get back on *the juice.'* And Rude said, 'Well, we're trying to have a baby.' And Vince said, 'Well, you need to do that sometime on your own time. You need to get back on the *juice.* And Rude said, 'Well, I'm not going to do that right now.' And Vince said, 'Well, call me when you get on it, but right now you're fired.'"

After Rick's death, and when there was no further investigation of its cause, Dave Meltzer observed: "Spending too much time on Rude's death might bring up questions that nobody wants to address in wrestling because they know the answers, like what he may have died from, and why so many wrestlers die so young."

A few weeks later, after Owen Hart was killed in his ill-fated ring entrance, wrestling's death list attracted media attention. *The National Inquirer* took a close look at the expanding list of dead wrestlers and claimed wrestlers' death rate was 87 times higher than for police killed in line of duty. Dave Meltzer again joined the computation fray with his own figures: "Over the past 20 months, five [wrestlers] have died and several others had near-misses in car wrecks and overdoses. That's one death out of every 27 wrestlers and several near-misses dating back 20 months, so on an annual basis that amounts to one death in 45 over the course of a year, [or] roughly 24 times the death rate of men in the same age bracket in society as a whole. Meltzer spit out his own conclusion: *"I don't care if you're talking rock stars, TV actors, stunt men, Russian Olympic stars from the '60s or race car drivers, I don't think if you go back 20 months in any of those professions at the major league level you'll have one out of every 27*

performers dead and if you did, it would have to be viewed as a profession that needs reform"

But wrestling's body count continued. Thirty-six year old Gary Albright suffered a fatal heart attack during an American Legion hall wrestling match in Hazleton, Pennsylvania in early 2000. Gary was a three-time All-American wrestler at the University of Nebraska and wrestled on the U.S. national team from 1981 to 1984. His autopsy showed an enlarged heart and several blocked coronary arteries. Three weeks later, wrestler Bobby Duncum, 34, was found dead at his Texas home with three patches of the powerful painkiller Fentanyl (a synthetic opiate used as a painkiller for cancer patients) stuck to his body. Bobby, Jr., the son of the Bobby Duncum of football fame whom I wrestled in Atlanta many years earlier, was another wrestler who used painkillers to relieve his aches and boredom before they became a way of life. His widow said later, "The wrestling business itself is very tough. You have to be a very strong individual not to succumb to the negative aspects . . . it changed all of us - it's a crazy mentality. Even football players are not like this. *It's part of the culture*," she said.

Part of the culture. For outsiders, *wrestling culture* is difficult to fathom but one person who understood it well was Dr. Joel Hackett of Indianapolis. Dr. Hackett had his medical license suspended in August 1999 after he admitted to authorities he dispensed controlled substances to pro wrestlers in eight to ten different states and Canada. In the tradition of Dr. Zahorian (whose dead wrestler clients included Eddie Gilbert and Big John Studd), Hackett had prescribed drugs for now dead Brian Pillman and Louie Spicolli and several other wrestlers in both WCW and the WWF. After Hackett's suspension, the WWF claimed it had already banned Hackett (as well as Dr. Jeff Unger of California) from appearing backstage at its events or having contact with WWF wrestlers in 1995, but when wrestlers learned that Hackett had been declared *persona non grata*, they gave Hackett comps to the wrestling shows; afterward, the WWF stopped giving comps to wrestlers. In WCW, some wrestlers paid Hackett to fly to events in San Francisco and Las Vegas, even after Louie Spicolli died. After Hackett's medical license was suspended, Brian Pillman's widow Melanie said the authorities got the wrong doctor - she didn't blame Hackett for Brian's death, but another wrestlers' *pharmacist* - Dr. Edmund Chein of Palm

Springs, California who prescribed HGH for Pillman during the 18 months before his heart gave out.

As the decade came to a close, one might have expected pro wrestling's staggering death toll during the 1990s to have finally shocked its audience into realizing there was something very wrong with an entertainment business that made so much money while literally eating its young - and demand that something be done about protecting wrestlers from dying so often. But that did not happen and although pro wrestling produced rare public outrage at about this time, it wasn't about why so many young men were dying. Instead, critical attention focused on pro wrestling's sleazy appearances, its new *look* - the *tastelessness* and vulgarity of its TV stunts, skits and scripts that crossed middle class standards of decency. A huge controversy developed about TV wrestling's *edgy* theatrics and The Business took a public beating for its adolescent raunch. For whatever else may be said about it, pro wrestling's content controversy in the late 1990s succeeded in diverting public attention from the industry's *genuine* obscenity - its working environment that produced so many sad endings.

The content controversy began when the longest promotional war in the history of The Business entered a new chapter in September 1995 when Ted Turner's WCW elected to go head-to-head with Vince McMahon's Monday night cable TV show in a race for ratings that would attract advertising dollars, the industry's newest revenue source. The TV *Monday Night Wrestling Wars* between McMahon and Turner soon degenerated into a contest between provocative stunts and skits, not wrestlers, and one of McMahon's weapons was exploiting Turner Broadcasting's relatively strict standards and practices code. McMahon saw his opening and exploited the license it gave him to create more sex, more violence, more blood, more coarse talk and more tasteless stunts and ring characters. And less wrestling. McMahon's WWF brand entered the trash-talking Nineties in spring 1997 when his wrestlers' interviews were sprinkled with rough language *(black*

ass, bullshit, tough shit and *no good son of a bitch)* and his pay-per-view shows now featured *juicing* in all its up-close, gory detail.

After McMahon realized the Bret Hart-Shawn Michaels double-crossed Montreal *finish* was public knowledge, he manipulated his audience's hostile backlash by igniting a new wrestling *angle* that featured himself as central *heel* character in his Monday night skits. To facilitate his *babyface-to-heel turn,* he scripted a lengthy feud with the foul- mouthed but cult *babyface* Steve Austin (Steve Williams) who later sold more merchandise than anybody; the biggest seller was a plain black t- shirt with *AUSTIN 3:16* on it. *Rolling Stone* magazine noted Steve Austin's surprising path to *wrestling* fame by simply saying *ass* and *Hell, yeah* and unleashing his new finishing move - an upturned middle finger. The Austin-McMahon feud *angle* was so successful it ended Ted Turner's WCW 83-week ratings dominance in the *Monday Night Wars.* When *Rolling Stone* observed that Austin's character scripts "*marked another sad step into the gutter"* for traditional wrestling fans, the magazine was commenting on pro wrestling's increasingly *tasteless* appearance - not its internal culture that produced *lifeless* performers.

Rolling Stone's myopic view of pro wrestling's gutter was to some extent shared by sports columnist Phil Mushnick at the *New York Post* who noticed TV wrestling's ratings and raunch in early 1998 and named Vince McMahon, Jr. "the *high priest of low life"* But Mushnick at least enlarged his social criticism by claiming the WWF was "rife with drug abuse, fosters the worst racial stereotypes and glorifies gang violence" presented to audiences filled with 14-year olds. Although Mushnick noted pro wrestling's *drug abuse,* the main target of his outrage was pro wrestling's antisocial and sleazy content - especially, the WWF's racial and sexual stereotypes (wrestling characters represented by a transvestite in diapers and blackface, a Puerto Rican biker, black gang members, a male porn star, a black pimp accompanied to the ring by hoes). Mushnick also railed against wrestler skits that showed simulated castration, pantomimed fellatio, guys grabbing women's breasts and one wrestler who brought a mannequin head to the ring, which was a convenient excuse for the audience to scream, WE WANT HEAD!) - all intended to appeal to an adolescent audience.

But even with sustained scrutiny by the *New York Post's* Phil Mushnick, pro wrestling's *real* obscenity - its cruel and outrageous death toll of young men - never made it to the public's radar screen. Instead, pro wrestling's more visible *tastelessness* criticism captured attention because bawd and bawdy TV skits were easier to see without much effort. The avalanche of public disapproval started a few months later when Scranton Pennsylvania's Catholic Youth Center, which had rented facilities to WWF wrestling for 30 years, publicly terminated its WWF relationship. By early 1999, some cable TV outlets worried about losing corporate sponsors and complained Monday night wrestling was producing bad publicity; they lobbied for a toned down product that wouldn't turn off advertisers. Then an Indiana University study quantified the *tasteless* content of 50 WWF TV shows - 1,658 instances of a wrestler grabbing or pointing to somebody's crotch about once every 4 minutes, and 434 references to *suck it!* and 157 instances of *giving the finger.* As expected and scripted, Vince McMahon ripped the study and other critics as "out of touch moral crusaders who don't have a clue and egghead professors with flimsy studies who treat the common man with contempt." McMahon's self confidence was justified by the usual business standards: his considerable TV ad revenue (American advertisers now spent more than $50 million a year to sponsor TV wrestling) told him that few TV shows performed as well as his in delivering a large audience of teenage boys (his TV ratings showed that thirty-seven percent of his audience was under 18).

Nonetheless, pro wrestling's *tasteless* criticism attracted corporate attention in October 1999 when U.S. Federal Communications Commission director Gloria Tristani publicly criticized TV wrestling for targeting children in advertising and marketing and asked the wrestling industry to exercise restraint by regulating itself. At about this time, Fortune 500 advertisers started to pull their sponsorship deals with McMahon's WWF TV shows. The corporate exit was costly: the WWF lost Wrigley (whose marketing office cited problems with content), Coca Cola ("the WWF had crossed the line in terms of content and language," it said), Target Stores removed WWF wrestler Al Snow's head-doll off its shelves and the U.S. Army pulled its advertising, as did the U.S. Air Force ("The Air Force does not approve of, condone or the support the vile, vulgar behavior depicted in these shows," said a spokesman); M & M Mars candy pulled out as did AT&T ("there is a generally awkward feeling in blue-chip America about

aligning oneself with what critics call gratuitous violence, given events on school and college campuses," said an AT&T spokesman). When Ted Turner made a rare appearance on CNN's *Larry King Live* in December 1999, he said he got into the wrestling business for "guys slamming each other and not for all the other stuff that's been happening." He said Vince McMahon got into trouble because of his show's language, violence and sexual content.

After losing so many big TV sponsors, Vince McMahon performed a *heel-to-babyface turn* in a WWF press conference during which he promised to tone down his TV wrestling with "less aggression, less colorful language, less sexuality," and blamed his advertiser problems on a new *heel* enemy, the Parents Television Council's chairman L. Brent Bozell. At about this time, McMahon crafted a new wrestling *con* to *work* public disapproval of *tasteless* content: he would continue with raunchy skits, scripts and stunts but follow each of them with an official apology the next day - which is what happened in December 1999 after the WWF presented a pay-per-view event which featured an *evening gown match* in which sexy Miss Kitty (Stacey Carter, then wife of TV announcer Jerry Lawler) lost her top and flashed her breasts briefly before WWF agent Bob Remus (formerly, Sgt. Slaughter) quickly covered her with a towel; as also scripted, the WWF apologized the following day for *unauthorized exposure.*

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As 1999 drew to a close, The Business celebrated unprecedented commercial success after a decade of the very worst publicity in its history. Despite damning disclosures and unexpected *potatoes* and *bumps* along the way, 1999 was the most financially successful year in pro wrestling history. A few months later, *Forbes Magazine's* annual listing of the 500 richest Americans pegged Ted Turner at No. 25 (worth $9.1 billion) and Vincent Kennedy McMahon at No. 260 (worth $1.1 billion). They had both done well for themselves, and lots of others connected with The Business seemed happy: its new, young fans approved wrestling's *edgy* content and cable TV operators cared little about sex and violence so long as they got their 50%

of revenues and pro wrestling's merchandise manufacturers prospered with new sales records.

More importantly, all the wrestlers who died or were injured or quit or sued were easily forgotten when their *spots* were quickly filled by new faces on younger bodies, as yet unbroken or unspoiled. Yesterday's shattered lives were replaced by the next generation's eager chase of glory under bright lights. It didn't much matter that The Business had buried so many of its young men, broken the bones of others and betrayed promises made to all. They all could be replaced and they were.

For The Business, the important lesson of the decade was discovery of new promotional principles and enough *marks* to make them work: tell 'em it's fake and nobody will care about other deceptions; tell 'em it's not competition and nobody will care about injury and death; tell 'em they're independent contractors responsible for their own bodies and dead wrestlers get little sympathy, and tell 'em its all sports entertainment - and they'll let anything go. It was all Nineties' hardcore style and still a work, and still heel mayhem that nobody took seriously.

EPILOGUE

As I COME to the end of this story about pro wrestling's sorry history of greed, abuse and betrayal, I intend to finish it on a positive note - as unlikely as that may seem. For one thing, I don't join those who want wrestling to disappear from the face of the earth. Like millions of others, I love wrestling! Why? Because it's so much fun. Or at least, could be. And it should be. When Aristotle argued "amusements should be our medicines," he provided pro wrestling's ultimate justification. But pro wrestling would be more agreeable and likeable if it were above board, removed from unnecessary *mark* mentality.

My view is that a wrestling show ought to send *everybody* home happy, including especially the *boys* who are told to *drop the strap*, *take a bump* and *put the other guy over.* But the con ought to end by purging pro wrestling's unclean fun - its *real heel* mayhem, its *chokehold* on the *boys.* Several years ago during wrestling's steroid scandal, my old Pittsburgh powerlifting acquaintance Bruno Sammartino said, *"It's time to clean up this business or abolish it because it's nothing like it used to be. Right now, it's filled with human junk"* Like Bruno's other admirers, I respect Bruno's mark on pro wrestling history and was gratified to know he also thinks it's time to clean up wrestling. But if Bruno's assertion about *human junk* means that wrestling's problems stem from drug-abusing wrestlers, I don't agree. In my view, wrestler abuse of steroids and other drugs is a *symptom* of the industry's problem, not *the* problem; pro wrestling's *human junk* description best applies to the promoters and owners who created the conditions that *cause* wrestler drug abuse. And I would add that *cleaning up this business* means not only eliminating the working conditions that cause drug use but also rooting out the industry's other labor and business practices that abuse and betray its performers in other ways.

Pro wrestling's genuine reform will not be easy, as 40 years of government investigations and a dozen lawsuits show but the main problem with reforming wrestling is the recurring *"Who Cares?"* response from just about everybody outside The Business. Unlike other entertainment industries with a market and revenue stream of its size, pro wrestling has no internal or even external mechanism that operates as a watchdog for abusive

practices and holds the industry accountable to standards of civilized society. The sad fact is the wrestling business is viewed as an embarrassing stepchild of its parent institutions sport and theater because it belongs to neither. As a result, The Business *still* operates on the margins of respectable commerce, falling between the cracks of accepted business standards intended to govern other entertainment industries. Historically, the wrestling business operated in the shadow economy of bribes and kickbacks to arena managers, athletic commissions, sportswriters and TV stations, as this book has shown. Today, pro wrestling still is exempt from those ordinary rules of human decency that apply to circus clowns and strippers. The Business still is a rogue industry in a larger world of sports entertainment.

It should not surprise anyone that wrestling promoters prefer it this way, viewing outside scrutiny as meddling; usually operating on the margins of legality, the wrestling establishment has always feared that a closer look by the larger world might cause politicians to *regulate*, union organizers to *organize* and honest journalists to report pro wrestling's *real* mayhem outside the ring. The fact that *nobody takes wrestling seriously* on the outside is just fine with The Business. As a discredited offshoot of the carnival, pro wrestling hides behind its secrecy and reputation as *"a serialized sideshow for the mentally defective,"* a *pseudo sport* that doesn't deserve serious consideration. American journalists view pro wrestlers as con artists who sell bloodlust, and even exploited performers don't get much sympathy. Nor are wrestlers' unsafe working conditions thought to require protection by conventional worker, health and safety standards. Nobody in positions of power or influence worries about wrestler mistreatment or whether wrestlers can afford vacations or pay medical bills or send their kids to college or have decent retirement arrangements. In general, pro wrestling's abuses escape public scrutiny because the media ignore them, preferring instead to focus on pro wrestling's *surprising* popularity *despite its obvious fakery!*

Until Johnny Valentine died in 2001, nobody asked who paid for wrestler funerals. And Johnny's funeral wasn't the only one that year. Another wrestler who didn't live out the year was Terry "Bam Bam" Gordy who died in his sleep of a blood clot to his heart at age 40. Terry was another big guy, six feet-four and 289 pounds who wrestled for about 23 years, often as a headliner in Texas and Japan, but had a reputation for living a *high octane, southern lifestyle with chemicals.* Terry left a wife, two daughters and a son at the Lane Funeral Home in Rossville, Tennessee in the summer of2001. About three months later, 46 year-old Gentleman Chris Adams was shot dead by his best friend after a night of drinking in Waxahachie, Texas. Chris had been another of wrestling's star performers on the Dallas-based World Class Championship Wrestling circuit and another victim of drugs and alcohol. At the time of his death, Chris's six year old daughter was living with him while he awaited trial on manslaughter charges, stemming from a girlfriend's death associated with ingestion of GHB (gamma hydroxybutyrate). A year later in the spring of 2002, Davey Boy Smith dropped dead at age 39 from a heart attack caused by many years of steroid use, said doctors. Days later, Big Dick Dudley (Alex Rizzo) died of kidney failure at age 37; Alex was another wrestler who got hooked on painkillers, taking as many as 15 to 20 Vicodins a day at the time of his death - about five to seven times normal dosage. After Alex died, his former wife (who also performed in wrestling as Electra) pronounced a wrestler obit that we'd heard before: *"I know it sounds cold and horrible, but it's true - the wrestling business killed him"* she said. And *it was* cold and horrible: Alex was *the 43*rd *death* of an active wrestler in five years, but outside The Business, Alex Rizzo's funeral attracted no more attention than had the 42 wrestler deaths that preceded his. Out in the real world, the general view is since nobody forces someone to become a professional wrestler, it's their tough luck if they become victims of a sports entertainment sewer with sad endings.

In my view, pro wrestling doesn't have to be this way and I've argued in this book that public indifference to wrestling's egregious and historic abuses stems from the wrestling industry's own history of public deception and the public's predictable reaction to having been *marks* in a *con.* Pro wrestling's credibility has been spoiled countless times and as a result, *almost nobody takes it seriously.*

In the years since I was wrestling, The Business changed in many ways. After Ted Turner bought the Crocketts' Carolinas promotion and Georgia Championship Wrestling (and what was left of the National Wrestling Alliance), Turner dropped his NWA affiliation during an 18- year wrestling war with Vince McMahon's WWF. Later, Turner Broadcasting was purchased by Time Warner, Inc. and Time Warner ultimately merged with America On-Line (AOL). Then AOL-Time Warner sold Ted Turner's wrestling company - World Championship Wrestling - *to Vince McMahon* for two and a half million dollars, a lot less than Turner bought it for. When TV wrestling left Turner Broadcasting, Ted Turner didn't care - Ted made a tidy $2.5 *billion* in stock holdings when Time Warner merged with AOL. By the end of 2001, Ted Turner was still worth several billion dollars more than Vince McMahon and although Vince prevailed in the wrestling battle, Ted walked off to his Montana ranch with more dollars as the biggest stockholder in the world's largest media company of which he became vice chairman. So, who won the last and longest wrestling war? It's probably arguable, but certainly not the wrestlers.

Today, the old National Wrestling Alliance continues as one of prowrestling's lesser brand names, but as a hollow shell of its former self in a loose confederation of a small, local promotions. Now, Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment (McMahon lost a protracted trademark dispute with the World Wildlife Federation, giving up his "WWF> logo in early 2002 and adopted the "WWE" name) dominates the United States, although McMahon's *new* monopoly is of no more interest to the U.S. Justice Department's Antitrust Division than was the previous one.

Almost all the persons I knew in wrestling and whose names were mentioned in this book have either left The Business or now passed away. [2] The promoters and *bookers* I worked for have been replaced by one man, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, and virtually all the wrestlers I worked with have been replaced with younger, more pumped and juiced bodies. Some of the *boys* I knew or wrestled are still marginally involved with The Business: Afa ("The Samoan") Anoia, The Rock's uncle, now runs a

wrestling school in Pennsylvania and operates an independent wrestling promotion WXW; Paul DeMarco (Paul DeMarchi) operates a wrestling school in Sacramento where he spends the rest of his time working at odd jobs for a local church; Ron Fuller still promotes Friday night wrestling shows at Chilhowie Park, Tennessee; Dusty Rhodes recently started his own Turnbuckle Wrestling independent promotion in the south, and after 30 years in The Business still cuts his forehead for a few hundred bucks a night.

Other old friends from wrestling are now out of The Business entirely: Thunderbolt Patterson last wrestled regularly in 1990 when he was 51; today, he operates a shelter in Atlanta for troubled kids where I'm on the board of directors. Louie Tillet (Louie Michaud) recently sold his gourmet restaurant and now remodels houses and often golfs in the Carolina mountains. Johnny Walker wrestled into his 60s, finally retired from wrestling to a cottage his family owns in Hawaii; a year ago, Johnny lost Olivia, his talented wife who made fancy ring robes for several wrestlers. Jack Brisco still lives in Tampa where he oversees his Brisco Brothers Body Shop with brother Jerry; Jack recently launched his own internet webpage where he sells photos of himself and videos of his great matches. Ronnie Garvin is a DC-9 pilot for an air freight company and Ron Pope works as a bar bouncer in southern California. Bob Orton, Jr. now sells used cars in the St. Louis area. Angelo Poffo, now 76, and his wife Judy are retired to a Largo, Florida condominium; son Lanny lives nearby, as does Randy ("Macho Man Randy Savage"), who recently renovated and renamed the 66th Street Gold's gym in honor of his father.

Ernie "Big Cat" Ladd resides in Houston, where he is active in Republican party politics and works with a Christian evangelical group that visits prisons and helps kids in troubled neighborhoods. Maurice

"Mad Dog" Vachon lost a leg to an auto accident a few years ago and his brother Paul "The Butcher" Vachon, now 64, ekes out a living by selling magnetic wands to kids at state fairs in the northeast. Eddie Mansfield is still living down his reputation for blowing *kayfabe* with me in 1985, and now operates a small wrestling school that promotes occasional arena

events and TV shows; Eddie's friend Otis Sistrunk went back to the University of Mars to finish his degree. Leo Garibaldi now sells jewelry in Las Vegas and has his own website that shows family photos. Ox Baker (Doug Baker) retired from wrestling in 1988, opened a wrestling school, published a children's coloring book, recorded a music CD and recently wrote a cookbook dedicated to "the fallen warriors."

Regrettably, Lou Thesz did not live long enough to read this book; Lou died suddenly at age 86 in April 2002 when this book was in production. After about 55 years on the mat, Lou wrestled his last match in Japan in 1990 when he was 74 ("I was over the hill, of course, but ego is a crazy thing," he said). In his final years, Lou trained wrestlers in Japan and at Kokopelli's Gym in Winter Haven, Florida, and his icon status in pro wrestling history permitted him to singlehandedly nominate inductees to an Iowa-based Wrestling Hall of Fame named in his honor. Pro wrestling's earlier *godfather* Jim Barnett, now 78, is still in The Business; today, he is employed by Vince McMahon as a special advisor. Except for Barnett and Jerry Brisco, who still works in the office for Vince McMahon and sometimes appears in TV skits, none of the persons mentioned in this book got a *spot* in wrestling's new economy, which still is celebrated each year around April Fools Day when *Wrestlemania* becomes the year's biggest, noisiest and richest night in industry history.

The Georgia politicians mentioned in this book have taken various career paths far removed from pro wrestling. Since his presidency ended in 1981,Jimmy Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his freelance advocacy of human rights around the world, although strangely, not in professional wrestling. The former President's mother Miz Lillian died in October 1983, but no wrestlers attended her funeral. Wyche Fowler, after 16 years as Georgia and U.S. congressman, was appointed ambassador to Saudi Arabia and today operates a multinational business consulting firm. Former Atlanta mayor and U.N. ambassador Andy Young also operates a consulting firm for international businesses and occasionally teaches at Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. Zell ("Zig Zag") Miller is now a U.S. senator from Georgia. John H. Lewis is serving his eighth term as a U.S. congressman from Georgia's fifth district and continues to be a major player in national civil rights activity.

After 28 years in Georgia's General Assembly, Representative Dick Lane retired in 1994; during his long tenure, Dick authored 14 constitutional amendments and more than 160 bills, one of which was the ill-fated bill to regulate pro wrestling. Ronald Bryan ("Bo") Ginn now heads a lobbying firm based in Alexandria, Virginia; Lauren "Bubba" McDonald, Jr. occupies a position on Georgia's Public Service Commission and operates a funeral home with his son in Cumming, Georgia. Johnny Isakson went to Washington as a U.S. congressman after winning a special election to replace former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Culver Kidd died in December 1995 at age 81. Roy E. Barnes was elected Georgia's 80th governor in 1998 when he campaigned for major health care reform legislation, including a promise to give "careful consideration" to health and safety regulations for pro wrestlers; today, the state of Georgia is no closer to realizing that promise than in 1948 when Roy Barnes was born. Michael J. Bowers, the Georgia Attorney General who refused to investigate Ted Turner's influence on Georgia politicians who killed the bill to regulate wrestling, ran unsuccessfully for Georgia governor in 1997 when he campaigned against affirmative action; today, he is a partner in the Atlanta law firm Meadows, Ichter & Bowers, where his colleague Cary Ichter has a racial discrimination lawsuit pending against Ted Turner's defunct World Championship Wrestling. Still defending pro wrestling's egregious labor practices and Ted Turner is the Atlanta powerhouse law firm of Troutman Sanders, still headed by former Georgia governor Carl Sanders but without his old law partner Tench Coxe, and Georgia Championship Wrestling's attorney and corporate officer, who retired from the firm.

Another change in The Business since my wrestling days is the industry's new visibility. Today, pro wrestling is part of mainstream American pop culture, marketed and sold as entertainment, not sport. Some say wrestling's current popularity with kids and new visibility is a consequence of The Business having finally come clean with its audience - it's not fake sport, but real theater. But the end of *kayfabe* isn't responsible

for wrestling's new punk appeal; that aspect of wrestling's popularity is a result of product redesign and marketing - enough adolescent raunch and sexual innuendo to capture its pubescent attention.

Beyond its current visibility, however, much of The Business has not changed over the years and certain of its secrets still remain hidden. Pro wrestling's new openness is superficial, now played as another wrestling *angle.* In many ways, The Business is locked in its time- honored tradition of operating in a dark corner of the entertainment world with its own anachronistic rules and procedures. The *spirit* of *kayfabe* has survived to publicly protect the ugly side of pro wrestling's private face. Today, as I watch younger *boys* on TV, *bumping* and *going over* and *doing jobs* and performing stunts, skits and scripts, I wonder if they've been *smartened up* to this industry's only remaining secret - their own servitude. Do they understand that pro wrestling's cruelest *con* involves their own seduction by dreams of bright lights and celebrity? Do they realize they are pro wrestling's only remaining *marks?*

You wouldn't think so from the collection of wrestler books published recently (many copyrighted by McMahon's WWF). Most of these books *leave a lot to be said* about The Business as they play loose with facts about the industry's labor practices, its backstage politics and manipulation, wrestler drug abuse and early wrestler deaths and the industry's legendary racism and sexism. With a couple of exceptions (such as Gary Michael Cappetta's *Bodyslams!* and Tom Billington's *Pure Dynamite),* recent wrestling books seem more interested in putting their authors *over* and sweeping the industry's greed, abuse and betrayal away from public view; they ignore the rougher side of The Business that the industry doesn't want you to know about. As one reviewerconcluded, *"There's a lot more about pro wrestling than a bunch of guys in costumes andfake names playing cowboys and Indians in their underwear"* And there's even more to be told about pro wrestling's backstage than a chronological listing of who slept with Missy Hyatt and how they performed, as inventoried in her recently published account of how she lived her wrestling *gimmick* outside the ring.

For example, one wonders why Mick Foley's two books avoided discussion of wrestling's economics and the wrestlers' portion of the revenue. Now Mick is a smart guy and I'm sure he knows wrestling economics - that there's a lot more industry revenue and a lot fewer

wrestlers today than ever before. I suspect that Mick understands the wrestling industry's labor problems are larger than ever, yet he avoids candid confrontation with the entire labor issue with feeble admissions about his paltry *payoffs* during most of his career. Mick Foley's second book at least acknowledged wrestler deaths and drug abuse, but the truthful admissions are buried in an unconvincing defense of TV wrestling's coarse language and crude skits for its young audience. I don't know Mick Foley, but I expected more candor and insight; on the other hand, I also know *the wrestling business does funny things to people.*

Another recently published wrestler-book by The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), also copyrighted by Vince McMahon, contains the remarkable assertion *"there is no racism on our show"* In light of Dwayne's own multi-racial background, his book was of interest to pro wrestling's substantial nonwhite wrestling audience. But Dwayne's contention surprised *everyone* familiar with pro wrestling's sad history of racism, especially its treatment of black wrestlers required to enact crude racial stereotypes and perform race-baiting *angles.* Dwayne's *no-racism* assertion must have especially surprised his own father Rocky Johnson who wrestled in the '70s and '80s; it's hard to believe that Dwayne's daddy didn't tell him about the demeaning history of black performers in pro wrestling. Dwayne's *no-racism* conclusion must have jolted three black wrestlers he worked with in the WWF: Ron Simmons (who became the *first* black wrestler given a world championship title for *four* months in 1992), Charles Wright (required to perform a demeaning black pimp character accompanied to the ring by a bevy of long- legged, scantily clad *'hoes)* and legit power lifter Mark Henry (who was given the ring name *"Sexual Chocolate").* And Dwayne's book certainly shocked the nine nonwhite wrestlers who filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against Ted Turner's WCW in early 2000 because they were *required to portray demeaning stereotyped racial characters*, couldn't get the *pushed babyface* roles assigned to whites and were *paid less* than white performers. In short, Dwayne Johnson's *The Rock Says* leaves a lot to be *said* about race and wrestling, but as I've warned so many times, *the wrestling business does funny things to people.*

From two other recent wrestling books, one might have expected serious discussion of the industry's sexism - sexual discrimination and sexual harassment. The books by female performers Missy Hyatt (Melissa

Hiatt) and Chyna (Joanie Laurer) were rare opportunities to talk openly about the current T & A exploitation of women wrestlers (such as Sable, discussed here earlier) and the industry's history of heterosexual harassment. Although Missy Hyatt's book certainly alludes to her own harassment problems ("You get a *push* because you're family or because you kiss ass *or because you give the booker head"* she writes) but she doesn't talk about her lawsuit against Ted Turner's WCW on sexual harassment charges because, she explains, she signed a confidentiality agreement not to talk about it. Chyna's book is similarly silent about the industry's treatment of women wrestlers, including the WWF's experiences in the early 1990s with referee Rita Chatterton or the homosexual harassment of young ringboys. Instead, Joanie Laurer's critique of sexism in pro wrestling is timid, carefully hidden in a revealing quotation from another woman wrestler - Luna Vachon, a pro wrestling veteran and the daughter of retired wrestler Paul "The Butcher" Vachon. In the most illuminating lines of her book, Joanie quotes her sister wrestler Luna Vachon at length: *"We're not strippers. We're not bimbos, we're not empty-headed females. We like the sport. We love to entertain. . . . You know what the men have done to us? Besides paying us tons less than the men, objectifying us into eye- candy, T&A, the little wet dream for the little weenies, they turned us on each other, SOL [shit-out-of-luck]. Made us back-stab each other, turned us into being nasty to each other instead of lifting each other up. And the real bitch is you . . . try to get beyond the girly thing, you show 'em you're into the moves and counter-moves and that you can take a dive off the top rope as good as any of them,, they start calling you a man, a dyke, a 'roid junkie, a muffin diver, all that crap"*

Or maybe those *are* Joanie's sentiments and Luna Vachon is a convenient tag partner to take a *bump* for the unscripted *potato* to the wrestling industry. I suppose we'll never know. Yeah, *the wrestling business does funny things to people.*

There's something else recent wrestling books don't talk about - *what happened to yesterday's stars.* Recent wrestler-books don't talk about

Haystacks Calhoun (Bill Calhoun), a main event attraction of the 1950s who died in 1989 while confined to a rusting house trailer in McKinney Texas, a victim of diabetes and poverty. As a wrestler, Haystacks drew hundreds of thousands of dollars all over the world but his life ended without an audience or a dollar.

Today's wrestling books also don't tell about Luscious Johnny Valiant (Thomas Michael Sullivan), now in his 50s, who was a wrestling star in the 1970s and early 1980s. Tom was part of a phoney brother tag team act with Jim Fallows, and the two of them drew crowds to Madison Square Garden and other arenas in Canada and Japan for several years. Today, Tom Sullivan lives alone in a $85 dollar-a-week room in Union City, New Jersey where he limps onto a bus each day to hang out with other unemployed actors at the Star Burger Deli in uptown Manhattan. Tom said recently, "I got a bad back, bad knees, a lot of scars. I did a lot of bleeding . . . if you put my brain in a canary, it would fly backward. Wrestling was my life for 30 years. I guess there's always somebody younger. There's always somebody who's better-looking - *that's the sad part of wrestling that people don't know about. When you get old and you can't wrestle anymore, you wind up as chopped meat, discarded like me."*

Today's wrestling books also don't talk about Tony Atlas (Tony White), a black wrestling star in the late 1970s and early 1980s before his career hit the skids and left him broke, homeless, suicidal and addicted to crack cocaine. In the early 1980s, Tony earned big money but couldn't hang onto it because of foolish spending on cars, clothes and girlfriends. And drugs, especially painkillers and crack. He now says he was "half crazy" from steroids. Today, Tony is 47, living in a one- bedroom apartment with ten others and tries to promote small independent wrestling shows in little towns with an audience of between 80 and 110. "It's not easy being a falling star," he said recently. Of today's wrestlers, Tony said, *"It's sad in a way. It's like they're chasing a dream that ain't even there"*

I have no idea of how many other retired and broken and penniless ex-wrestlers are scattered around the countryside living in poverty or illness, but they deserve better than what The Business gave them. Like Wahoo McDaniel, who died recently. Wahoo was another pro football player, having played eight years with the Houston Oilers, Denver Broncos, New York Jets and the Miami Dolphins, who entered pro wrestling for more

money. After 30 years on the mat, Wahoo finally retired from wrestling in 1989 but spent his last ten years as a diabetic in ill health. Near the end, Wahoo's NFLPA pension saved him from being destitute as he waited patiently for a kidney transplant. It never came and he died of renal failure and diabetes at age 63.

And recent wrestling books don't talk about Johnny Valentine (John Wisniski, Sr.), now remembered as the greatest wrestler *never to hoold the world heavyweight title.* Johnny was one of wrestling's blonde *heel* attractions in the 1950s and 1960s, but was paralyzed at age 47 after a 1975 airplane crash while working in the Carolinas. Johnny spent the next 25 years without medical insurance or retirement benefits, and was repeatedly turned down by wrestling promoters when he asked for an office job. Just before Johnny died in 2001, he said to his wife, *"I've made millions of dollars for the McMahons and also for the NWA or WCW and the Crocketts in the Carolinas and promoters around the world.. I'm not mad, I'm just sorry they think I can be of no use to the business"* In Johnny's final months, many oldtimers donated money to help pay for his final hospitalization. After Johnny's wife circulated a call for help to the wrestling fraternity over the internet, the Cauliflower Alley Club (a social group of retired boxers and wrestlers, organized in 1965 by former pro wrestler and movie actor Mike Mazurki) solicited private contributions to help Johnny Valentine. The CAC raised about $6,000, of which $100 were mine. I never wrestled Johnny, but I worked many events where we both performed and I got to know him in locker rooms. If the other *boys* who knew Johnny or worked with him had pitched in to help, he would have had a nicer send-off than he got and deserved, especially from the wrestling promoters for whom he made millions of dollars.

Unlike other wrestling books, the one you are reading has not been reluctant to shine some light into pro wrestling's dark corners, to tell these stories previously untold. Of course, I'm no longer part of The Business which means I'm no longer hanging at the end of a string that can be pulled or snapped; the copyright on this wrestling book is *not* owned by a

wrestling promoter. That's why I'm not afraid to talk freely about this industry's abusive practices and document its betrayals. That's also why I can continue to give voice to the proposition that *professional wrestling must change.* And it must change even without an organized demand for it nor paid lobbyists to advance the cause. The reason wrestling must change is because it's *the right thing to do.*

I want to close this account with some specific proposals for pro wrestling's reform. Over the years, I've come to think about a *bill of rights for wrestlers* that would grant certain protections already afforded persons in other occupations. In my view, a pro wrestlers' *bill of rights* should include the following three components: ***(1) Health and Safety Standards.*** Any meaningful reform must improve wrestler health and safety standards. The human costs of pro wrestling have become a national disgrace. For one thing, pro wrestling is a pharmacological disaster zone. It is too easy to dismiss the wrestlers' astonishing death toll as the result of too many young men making unwise lifestyle choices. Although that explanation is at one level true, it ignores certain requirements peculiar to the wrestling life: wrestlers use and abuse anabolic steroids to gain a competitive edge in the *bookers'* decision to *push* some *boys* and not others; wrestlers use and abuse other drugs to postpone fatigue from a punishing travel schedule; wrestlers use and abuse drugs to get *up* for that night's show and to get *down* afterward to sleep; wrestlers use and abuse drugs to temporarily numb the chronic aches and pains produced by each night's instructions to perform fantastic stunts, and wrestlers use and abuse drugs to mask their need for corrective surgeries because they cannot afford time off for recuperation. These are the causes of wrestler drug abuse, and they must be addressed.

After Johnny Valentine died, one of the wrestlers who was with Johnny on that fateful airplane crash in 1975 finally spoke up. Former world champion Ric Flair, one of wrestling's top money-makers for many years, said, "Look at how many guys have died in our business in the past five years. Nobody ever mentions their names anymore. *This is the most insensitive business in the world and it will continue to be until somebody does something about it.* We don't have the type of backing, be it union-wise or health insurance-wise and the reason is because under the current system, *everybody has to look out after themselves*" When Rowdy Roddy

Piper (Roderick George Toombs) learned that Cauliflower Alley Club (CAC) was collecting money for Johnny Valentine, he offered to donate five percent of his future wrestling earnings to the CAC Benevolent Fund. Piper remarked, "I say to the young wrestlers: 'Remember, Johnny Valentine never dreamt of having a collection taken up for him. *Somebody needs to do something about it. .. Wrestling is a huge industry now, and the industry needs to take care of its own*." And Roddy added, " *Wrestlers do not have many friends*." Roddy Piper now had a personal reason to be concerned about wrestlers' *few* friends - after a 28-year wrestling career in which he became one of its stars, he was suddenly fired by Ted Turner's WCW for becoming *disabled;* believing his termination was illegal, Rod filed a breach of contract lawsuit for damages of $1.4 million. *"It really hurts me that they'd talk to me like an injured dog and shoot me behind the barn.* I gave my heart and soul [to wrestling]," Rod said recently.

Pro wrestling's primitive health and safety standards also were noted by the famous sports orthopedic surgeon Dr. James Andrews. "I've probably treated all of the old-timers [wrestlers]. They didn't have any [health] care. They were lost, medically." Dr. Andrews knows what he was talking about: the grim statistics about early wrestler deaths, especially drug-related deaths, and the prevalence of serious injuries document the need for better medical supervision and healthcare. A recent study by Dave Meltzer of 612 "major league wrestlers" in three years (1986, 1991 and 1998) found that by the year 2000, 40% were either dead, permanently disabled or suffering serious drug or alcohol dependency. In recent years, pro wrestlers' death rate was *31 times higher* than NFL players.

Only Bill Goldberg's recent wrestling book *(I'm Next, The Strange Journey of America's Most Unlikely Superhero)* dares to talk about this aspect of The Business. I feel a kinship with Bill, who's another former University of Georgia football star; maybe involvement with real sport gives a guy more perspective on pro wrestling, which could explain Bill's candor about the extent of wrestlers' drug problems and the wrestling industry's abusive practices. Bill wrote critically about how The Business treats injured wrestlers who are required to go on with the show: "I still don't understand why, in a business that is choreographed like ours, steps can't be taken to alter the match when one of the wrestlers is injured. To me, a guys' health is more important than one pay-per-view match." To

illustrate, Bill tells about a young, *green* wrestler who was seriously injured in a match and taken to a hospital for insertion of a catheter to drain his kidneys. “The first damn words out of his mouth were *‘They’re going to cut my pay, aren’t they?”* And Bill described another wrestler this way: “We’ve got a guy working right now with three compressed vertebrae, and he can barely turn his neck [but] he has a clause in his contract that states if he’s out of wrestling for thirty days, they can fire him. What kind of crap is that? That sucks, and if that’s the world we live in, then something’s wrong. *We have no governing body to watch over us and it pisses me off. . . no matter how hard you work and how much you sacrifice your body, you can get hurt and get dropped -just like that”*

Since most wrestlers cannot afford to have their compensation cut in half, many return to the ring before they are ready, a problem also noted by Dr. James Andrews who often treats wrestlers’ herniated discs, shoulder dislocations, rotator cuff injures and rib fractures. “Once they get hurt, they have to wrestle hurt and many push too hard during the injury recovery,” Andrews said. The origin of pro wrestling’s human carnage that Dr. Andrews tries to fix surgically was revealed by wrestler Tom Billington, the now retired and crippled Dynamite Kid. In his autobiography *Pure Dynamite*, Tom wrote: “I’ll be honest, I didn’t feel good at all. Some days I struggled to get out of bed, I felt so terrible. I knew what it was. *The injuries I’d had over the years that never healed properly, and the drugs - steroids, painkillers, speed, cocaine. I was taking a lot of stuff, mainly just to get me through one day to the next,* Tom said, A *normal day for me was: speed to wake me up in the morning to catch an early flight, Valium to make me sleep on the plane, Percoset just before the match, then we’d wrestle, hit the beer and the cocaine until the early hours, before taking another Valium to put me to sleep at night.”* Tom explained the wrestlers’ dilemma: “You didn’t take a week’s holiday like you would in a normal job. If you took time off because you were injured, you didn’t get paid. It was one long hard slog.” Tom’s final betrayal was that 1986 night in Hamilton, Ontario when he was wheeled into a local hospital after his spine collapsed in the ring; as he waited on a stretcher in the hospital hallway for medical attention, he thought: “*These bastards don’t believe I’m hurt because I’m a wrestler.”*

It should go without saying that pro wrestlers need medical insurance and formalized rules and procedures that provide fair treatment of injured or

retired performers. Like everybody else, wrestlers need a formal system that includes a health plan, death benefits and pension system which could be funded by allocating no more than two percent of the revenue from pay per view wrestling shows; in each year, such a fund could grow by about $5 or $6 million dollars. Before that happens, however, wrestlers are going to have to collectively demand it.

(2) Union or Guild. Another required component of pro wrestlers' *bill of rights* is organizing a labor union or guild - for the usual reasons but in the midst of unusual resistance. Even stronger than pro wrestling's racism and sexism is its hatred of unions - the wrestling industry's longstanding fear that its performers might develop genuine *working* class solidarity and challenge certain *time-honored traditions* of The Business that keeps most wrestlers dependent, weak and divided.

Unfortunately, the word *union* also scares some wrestlers - like wrestling icon Lou Thesz, who once said: "I want to elevate wrestling. Do you realize that the athletes still have no protection in wrestling? There is no insurance, hospitalization, etc. This has got to be corrected. The men need some fringe benefits. They have homes and families that depend on them. In some places, they even have to worry if they are going to be paid. That's wrong." When asked if he was a union organizer, Thesz replied, *"No, we don't want a union. . . we want something like a players' association. The men need access to the gross receipts and knowledge that they will be paid after they fight,'* About a year before he died, Lou was again asked whether wrestlers should unionize and he replied, *"That was entertained many years ago, I tried to do that in Tennessee. After I talked to the union people, I realized it was nefarious promoters or nefarious union people. I didn't like what I heard.. The climate hasn't changed.. You are going to be under someone's thumb, either way"*

Hopefully, recent developments in The Business have changed the climate for acceptance of a wrestlers' union or guild or association. Those recent developments include public knowledge of the revenues produced by The Business, and they raise all the old questions about performers' fair share of revenue. Although wrestling economics were previously secret, everybody now knows that the WWF's past three fiscal years produced gross revenues of more than $1 billion and pretax profits of more than $225 million. Wrestlers don't need a business degree to comprehend where they

stand - although *they are the show,* they receive *only* between 12% and 15% of wrestling's gross revenues and they still are without the usual labor benefits found in the NFL, NBA and major league baseball and hockey - *health and injury insurance, paid travel expenses and pension plans.* The truly shocking facts of life are that pro wrestling was a major sports entertainment industry long *before* unions in pro football or basketball or baseball or hockey or the theater were organized and pro wrestlers *still* have not demanded fair or even comparable treatment. Even if today's wrestlers can't calculate the relevant comparisons, they can take *Forbes* magazine's word for it: pro wrestlers "are the very antithesis of celebrities in almost every other entertainment form."

But wrestlers are generally reticent to press their case. As Dave Meltzer observed, "promoters have talent by the balls in wrestling because of the belief that they can create a star out of whole cloth." In recent years, some well-paid wrestlers have hired agents to represent their interests, but those interests are always *personal* not collective. The enduring curse of wrestler self-interest and short-sightedness has a long history: in the 1950s, Antone "Ripper" Leone tried to get other wrestlers to join him to demand better treatment but found "as a group, they have no courage," he said; when Killer Karl Kox called a meeting of the top wrestlers in the country to join together and demand some control over their own destiny, not one guy showed up because they were scared; when Bob Roop tried to organize a wrestlers' union in the late 1970s, he also couldn't get wrestlers to stand together - "The guys who want to get *on top* say, 'Oh yeah, we should have a voice' but you can't get the top guys to join. If the guys *on top* making the big money get in the union, there is a good chance of them going through a process where they could lose their job and money. So the top guys say, 'Well, I'm not interested. I'm doing pretty good where I am.' And the promoter says you can be replaced, being that championships are not based on fact, but who he thinks the fans want to see," Bob said later. The same problem was described by Steve Williams a few years before he became WWF star Stone Cold Steve Austin: "There's guys making different levels of money. The guys making a ton of money, who you would figure would have the most clout as far as trying to get something [union organizing] done, they're not going to say anything because they're making such good money . . . The guys who weren't making the money didn't want to say anything because they were scared they were gonna get fired anyway . . .

the bottom line is when you talk about forming a union, what it all comes down to, you're in there for yourself and everybody [else] *gets shitcanned."*

In this respect, wrestler self-interest accurately reflects their vulnerability to being replaced by another good looking hard body. As Eddie Einhorn said, "I like a lotta things about wrestling - *There is no union, and if one of those blonde superstars gets hurt or retires, you can create another one*." Former promoter Bill Watts put the wrestlers' leverage problem this way: "It's awfully hard to unionize in a buyer's [owners] market. I don't give a damn if they do it or not. *Most of them don't have the gumption to follow through*," he said. Watts was at least right about wrestlers' absent *gumption,* a crippling occupational hazzard among pro wrestlers noted by Antone "Ripper" Leone, Bob Roop and Jesse Ventura, all of whom tried at various times to organize wrestlers, as I did. Today, with the return of promotional monopoly and more industry revenue with fewer performers, traditional wrestler mentality about working conditions may be changing. I hope so, because most of wrestling's reform rests in their heads and hands.

When that absent wrestler *gumption* finally appears, one of its first targets should be mounting a legal attack on pro wrestlers' labor classification of *independent contractors,* not *employees.* This employment classification may be a technicality of little interest to wrestling fans, but it's had profound consequences for wrestlers for many years. And it's another dirty little secret inside The Business: when promoters insist that wrestlers are *independent contractors,* they avoid legal obligations to provide certain workplace protections that wrestlers deserve - *health and insurance benefits, workers' compensation, unemployment compensation and a portion of employer-paid Social Security contributions and withheld income taxes.* When Terry Taylor, a 22-year veteran of The Business who wrestled for 15 years and later worked as a scriptwriter-booker for both the WWF and WCW, was asked recently whether there should be a union for pro wrestlers, he said: "Probably, but *the promoters would have to pay out millions in insurance benefits, disability insurance, retirement packages and so on.* It's much more economical to call the talent *independent contractors . . . That is the reason promoters will NEVER consider a wrestler an employee.*"

It's hard to understand why, when so many other entertainment performers (film and stage actors, ballet dancers, circus clowns and strippers) have achieved changed worker classification from *independent contractor* to *employee,* pro wrestlers have not. Although Jesse Ventura and Rena Mero and the recent wrestlers' racial discrimination suit openly addressed the wrestlers' *independent contractor* myth, I'm afraid most pro wrestlers are so wrapped up with *arena rats* and lost in their own *gimmicks,* they remain naively ignorant of the consequences of their mis-classification and the means to correct it. If wrestlers took the time and trouble to consult with labor lawyers or tax accountants, they would understand that any performer instructed *when* and *where* and *how* to perform (and *when* and *where not to perform)* is hardly independent. According to American labor and tax laws, such workers are *employees,* not *independent contractors,* because the worker does not *control* the activity.

Wrestling promoters also fear a change in wrestlers' labor classification to *employees* because *employee* status would give wrestlers the right to organize a labor union. Even without *employee* status, however, wrestlers could organize themselves as a guild of *independent contractors* like the Screen Actors Guild. Whichever labor association road is taken, pro wrestlers, who manage to cooperate with each other in wrestling rings nightly, will have to spend more time with each other away from their stunts and skits getting their most important act organized.

Today, there is much to learn from other performers in sport and entertainment who have organized. Now, wrestlers could affiliate with another union that is sympathetic to the wrestlers' cause and once affiliated, wrestlers could invite the other 14 million card-carrying, dues- paying union members in the U.S. to help "organize the unorganized," as AFL-CIO president John Sweeney likes to say. If the nation's other union members contributed just a dollar, those donations could underwrite immediate legal fees and a strike fund. If wrestlers were serious about organizing, their organized brothers and sisters would help them, I am certain. With advice from pro sport's player associations, today's wrestlers could endorse a product and event participation program that would produce income for a fund devoted to helping retired wrestlers in financial need; the Johnny Valentines of the wrestling world could be helped by an organized merchandise revenue sharing system comparable to such programs in other

professional sport and entertainment. Today's wrestlers also could look down the road a little further and agree to stage one or two charity pay-per-view events each year that would help fund benefits for retired wrestlers in need of medical care or housing. The proceeds from one or two PPV events a year would go a long way toward helping yesterday's *boys,* whether stars or *gebronies;* sooner or later, today's stars and *gebronies* will get there, too.

(3) Restore State Athletic Commissions. As the third component of the wrestlers' *bill of rights*, state athletic commissions should be restored - despite the current political climate of contempt for regulation of any kind. Wrestling's reform requires an outside authority to administer and enforce health and safety standards and monitor other aspects of wrestler treatment, such as compensation. Today, pro wrestling is regulated in about 25 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, but in many cases, wrestling regulation is primarily an exercise in tax collection. Only five states require wrestler physical exams, and only one state (Oregon) undertakes drug-testing. In other states, wrestling has been deregulated - a monumental mistake in my opinion. Recent wrestling deregulation in California, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey was orchestrated by The Business, especially the WWF which lobbied successfully (although unsuccessfully in Washington state, Oregon and New York).

But I remain convinced that outside oversight of pro wrestling is necessary and needed everywhere. Despite their frequent corruption by The Business in the past, state athletic commissions could be restored with a meaningful mission beyond political patronage and tax collection. Such commissions could provide an important monitoring function by overseeing compliance with prescribed procedures intended to protect wrestlers. In those states that still have commissions, the states ought to get them in order and here is a good place to start some serious butt-kicking with patronage and waste of tax dollars. Those states could bring archaic statutes and rules into line with reality and establish procedures that require fair and honest treatment of wrestlers and wrestling fans. In pro boxing, there is currently support for a national commission not dominated by political appointees at the state level, a proposal endorsed by Arizona Senator John McCain and New York's State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. It doesn't matter to me whether commission regulation is national or state, I just think

the history of the wrestling industry proves the need for commission regulation of some kind.

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As I pause in my long journey - my wrestling career started 35 years ago - I wonder if this book about the wrestling industry and wrestlers' problems will help move The Business closer to needed reforms. Although I wasn't the first wrestler blacklisted nor the only wrestler who tried to organize a labor union or the sole voice to speak about the need for health and medical oversight, I am apparently the first wrestler to have written a book about it. In doing so, I may have spoiled somebody's fun and if so, it was an unavoidable adjunct to my central objective which was to expose professional wrestling's cruelest *con.* The only intended victims of my reform crusade are the pro wrestling industry's business and labor practices.

My proposals for pro wrestling's reform don't strike most wrestlers as controversial; in private, most regard my proposed reforms as overdue. This is not the view of those who own and control the wrestling business, and they've not been reluctant to say what they think about what I have been up to. One promoter said, "Jim Wilson had a big name from football. He had a following, but he became a *prima dona,* a real bum. Jim had the world handed to him, but he ruined it with his attitude problem." Attitude problem? Yeah, I've got an attitude problem. So did George Washington. And Abe Lincoln. So did Martin Luther King. So did Lech Walesa. Anybody who fights for human or civil rights has an attitude problem. That's OK, I figure I'm in pretty good company.

I hope this book produces more support for wrestling's reform among wrestling's fans. I understand the public's indifference to wrestlers' problems was cultivated by The Business with its history of fibs and comedic farce. Hollywood entertainer Steve Allen put it this way: *"It's a sport without rules, where nobody keeps score. There are no clear winners, yet no one seems to care. It's a soap opera with a referee. A melodrama of mayhem.. A controlled riot that pauses for commercials"* Unfortunately, Steve Allen was right. And that's the trouble. And public disinclination to

take wrestling seriously is reinforced by wrestler-books where authors lose themselves in their *gimmicks* to *put themselves over.*

Lastly, I hope this book finishes what I started in 1985 on *20/20* to explain to my six children and former wife Nita what went wrong in our family after I became involved with pro wrestling. I want them to understand why their lives were not *normal,* as one of my daughters put it recently. I hope this book at least shows the seven most important persons in my life - Nita, Josh, Suzanne, Christina, Brad, Brett and Dwight - that I didn't intend it to be this way, and I now see that what went wrong in all our lives was to some extent my own making. Perhaps I should have walked away from wrestling's problems, as was suggested by many. Maybe I was too much a *babyface* believer in old principles of fairness and justice. Possibly, I was too self-confident in my All- American billing to move obstacles around to clear a path, to make a difference, to clean up a corrupt industry by my own determination. Whatever it was that pulled or pushed me to the lengths I went, I hope my efforts at least created awareness of wrestling's abuses and the need to correct them. Unlike anybody else I know, I took pro wrestling and its *chokehold* seriously. And still do.

CHAPTER NOTES AND SOURCES

Prologue

Contrary to conventional wisdom, pro wrestling may be *less* popular in the U.S. *today* than 50 years ago, if the measure of *popularity* is the annual number of tickets sold for live events or the *proportion of the population* watching TV wrestling. For example, available figures show that 20 to 25 million persons attended arena wrestling shows in 1954 but by the late 1980s, arena attendance was about 10 to 13 million a year; today, with a U.S. population of nearly 300 million, arena attendance is less than three million a year. Comparative TV ratings data show that 7.7 million persons watched wrestling on the DuMont network's weekly show from Chicago's Marigold Arena in 1954; today, between three and seven million viewers watch TV wrestling.

Recent national opinion surveys show the proportion of Americans who regard themselves as wrestling fans is between 18% (a 1999 Gallup Poll) and 15% (a 2001 Gallup poll), compared with 59% who say they are baseball fans and 41%, basketball fans. Recent polls do show, however, proportionately more wrestling fans in younger age groups (the figure reaches 30% among 18-to 29-year olds).

Chapter 1: The End of *Kayfabe*

The 1985 ABC-TV's *20/20* show cited here was broadcast on February 21, 1985 and *America Talks Back* was broadcast by Lifetime- TV on March 5, 1985 and this description is based on video transcriptions of those programs. Verne Gagne's published response to *20/ 20's* revelations appeared in *Verne Gagne's Pro Wrestling Report* (vol. 2, no. 3, March

1985); Herman Hickman's "Rasslin Was My Act" was published in *Saturday Evening Post* (Feb. 6, 1954) and sports columnist Red Smith's commentary about the Hickman exposé appeared a week later in his "Auld Lang Syne," *New York Herald Tribune* (Feb. 16, 1954). Ray Didinger's "Rasslin' Takes Hold" was published in three installments by *The Philadelphia Daily News* on Dec. 11 through 14, 1984, later reprinted as "Grappling With The Big Time - Inside Professional Wrestling" by *Associated Press Newsfeatures* to member subscribers around the country *(except in Atlanta)* beginning July 22, 1985. *Sports Illustrated's* shilling exercise for the first *Wrestlemania* was published in its April 29, 1985 issue with Hulk Hogan on its cover and "Who's Kidding Whom" by Bruce Newman and many pages of color photography by *S-Is* Walter Iooss inside, pp. 28-70; *S-Is* timid account of my take on The Business was watered down to a sidebar ("What You See Is Not Always What They Get") authored by N. Brooks Clark (page 60).

Although some have credited (blamed) Eddie Mansfield and me for *exposing* The Business, we were hardly the first; in fact, wrestling exposés have a long history, stretching back at least to 1907, about 34 years before I was born ("Gotch Not Proud of His Wrestling Title," *New York World,* Jan. 28, 1907). And many more exposés followed: "Big Mahmout Exposes Fakers in Wrestling," *Seattle Times,* Jan. 1, 1911; Hugh E. Knough, "Gotch-Hack Fiasco Put Big Crimp in Wrestling Game," *Seattle Times,* April 14, 1912). Similar wrestling exposés continued into the 1920s and 1930s - "Fake Mat Bouts Aired In Quiz; May Bar Sport," *Chicago Tribune* (June 7, 1927); "The Sonnenberg Wrestling Racket," Boston Better Business Bureau, *The Bulletin,* vol. I, no. 23 (Nov. 19, 1929); Robert Edgren, "Modern Wrestling Bouts Compared with Circus Act", *Washington Post* (Dec. 6, 1931); "A Mat Traitor, Or Rasslin' Killjoy?" *San Francisco Chronicle* (Feb. 2, 1936); Marcus Griffin, *Fall Guys, The Barnums of Bounce*, Chicago, Reilly & Lee (1937); Stanislaus Zbyszko, "Look What They've Done to Wrestling," *True* (August, 1953); Herman Hickman, "Rasslin Was My Act," *Saturday Evening Post* (Feb. 6, 1954); Arthur Daley, "Barnum Was Right", *New York Times* (April 19, 1954); "There's Method in Their Mayhem, Veteran Wrestler Exposes Tricks of Trade," *TV Guide* (Jan. 21, 1955); "Wrestling In Uproar As Ref Admits Bouts Fake," *Los Angeles Mirror News* (Oct. 19, 1955); "Two Referees Say Mat Matches

Fixed," *Los Angeles Examiner* (Oct. 19, 1955). That should be enough to make the point.

It may seem odd today, but the wrestling business was so annoyed by the exposés in earlier years that it usually reacted publicly with one of several scripted denials, as discussed in Joe Jares' amusing book, *Whatever Happened To Gorgeous George?* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice- Hall, 1974). Dan Parker, the *New York Daily Mirror* columnist who campaigned to expose *the burpers* for about 20 years once put it this way: *"Rule No. 1 of the Ancient and Prevaricating Order of Wrestling Promoters is Never admit The Game isn 't on the level - and why should we when it is?'"* (Dan Parker, "When Jimmy Bronson Found Facts of Mat Life," *New York Daily Mirror,* March 1957).

In years past, pro wrestling's code of *kayfabe* was taken so seriously that promoters even stonewalled fakery allegations in legal proceedings where untruthful testimony carries the penalty of perjury: Oklahoma promoter LeRoy McGuirk pled the Fifth Amendment, fearing that honest answers would get him prosecuted under a state law that prohibited *sham and fake* boxing or wrestling (*Bobby Eugene Nutt, a/k/ a Ron Starr v. LeRoy McGuirk, d/b/a LeRoy McGuirk Wrestling, an Oklahoma Corporation, and LeRoy McGuirk Championship Wrestling, Inc., an Oklahoma Corporation,* no. C-80-673, Tulsa County District Court, State of Oklahoma, March 17, 1980). In another court case, San Antonio promoter Joe Blanchard was asked, "Do you determine who wins and loses the matches in the organization which you run, or is that determined strictly by the wrestler's ability in the ring?" Blanchard replied, "I do not want to answer that, frankly" (Deposition of Joseph B. Blanchard, May 24, 1982 in *James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* no. C-79-1310A). Even Vince McMahon dodged the question in legal proceedings four years before he publicly admitted that wrestling was entertainment. In a 1985 deposition, he was asked, "Do you determine the outcome of the matches which you promote?" Before McMahon could reply, his attorney interrupted - "[I] object and instruct the witness not to answer the question!" (Deposition of Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Aug. 1, 1985 in *James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* no. C-79-1310A).

The WWF's first public admission that wrestling isn't a contest occurred in its 1988 lawsuit *Titan Sports, Inc. v. The State Athletic Control*

Board and Larry Hazzard, Commissioner for the State Athletic Control Board, Tax Court of New Jersey, no. 1424-1047-88 ME (Oct. 21, 1988). About a year later, Linda McMahon's testimony at a New Jersey legislative hearing made headlines in the *New York Times* - NOW IT CAN BE TOLD: WRESTLING ALL IN FUN, (Feb. 11, 1989), and a month later, the WWF argued for wrestling deregulation in Washington State because staging faked wrestling was *illegal* under state law (*Seattle Times*, March 2, 1989). But Vince and Linda McMahon were not the first wrestling promoters to spill the beans - about 31 years earlier, Milwaukee promoter John Heim said the same thing and for the same reason: to get a state athletic commission off his back. Heim told Wisconsin legislators: " *You can't sell a legitimate contest* [and] *there hasn 't been a legitimate wrestling contest in 50 years - we tried it once, and you could have heard a pin drop. If you put on a legitimate contest, no one would come back for the next one*." Like the McMahons, Heim's candor also was rewarded with headlines ("HONEST WRESTLING WON'T PAY OFF, SAYS PROMOTER," *Milwaukee Journal*, Dec. 12, 1957) which were wired around the country by Associated Press.

As recently as 1996, a courtoom *kayfabe* violation made newspaper headlines, as when Davey Boy Smith admitted under oath *"Every single thing in wrestling is a fake"* to which a prosecutor asked if that made wrestling a fraud and Smith replied, "If you want to put it that way," (see David Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter,* June 3, 2002). The 1989 episode of ABC-TV's *Nightline* in which Lou Albano changed the show's *finish* was broadcast on March 10, 1989. Many wrestlers of Albano's generation, like Bruno Sammartino, still have trouble breaking *kayfabe* (see his 1971 comments in Lee Alan Gutkind's "A Little Agony, A Little Ecstasy," *Sports Illustrated*, Sept. 27, 1971 and Bruno's autobiography, *Bruno Sammartino: An Autobiography of Wrestling's Living Legend,* Pittsburgh: Imagine, Inc., 1990).

The hostile stance taken by Lou Thesz regarding the wrestling industry's treatment of wrestlers on *America Talks Back* in 1985 is at odds with an interview he gave to a Las Vegas newspaper four years *earlier* in 1981 when Lou said: " ... *we want something like a players' association. The men need access to the gross receipts and knowledge that they will be paid after they fight"(see* Ed Koch, "Thesz: Too Many Champs Ruin it",

Las Vegas Valley Times, June 1, 1981). Lou also forgot to include these views in his 1995 autobiography written with Kit Bauman (*Hooker.: An Authentic Wrestler's Adventures Inside the Bizarre World of Pro Wrestling).*

Chapter 2: Requiem for an All-American

The point in time when pro wrestling was transformed from contest to theater is still argued about because nobody knows with certainty. In the absence of credible historical evidence, *New York Daily Mirror* sportswriter Dan Parker quipped: *"The last honest wrestling match was between Lacoon and the serpents - the serpents won that match and immediately became wrestling promoters"* Both Marcus Griffin(who wrote *Fall Guys* in 1937) and former wrestler and Yale football coach Herman Hickman (who wrote a much publicized wrestling exposé for *Saturday Evening Post* in 1954) roamed the historical countryside and concluded the Greeks faked it, too.

The historical evidence for the origin of *business matches* in the U.S. points to "The Solid Man" William Muldoon (who wrestled saloon *business matches* in the late 1800s and was later appointed New York State's first commissioner of pro wrestling). After Muldoon, Frank Alvin Gotch (still celebrated in Humboldt, Iowa as the last legitimate wrestler) played an important role in defining pro wrestling's *worked* future with his *badger game* that toured the Yukon Territory's Klondike in 1901 and his subsequent *business matches* with Fred Beel, Ernie Rober, Tom Jenkins and others, including some famous matches that produced gambling scandals in Chicago in 1908 and 1911 and Nebraska in 1915 and 1917 (see Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys, The Barnums of Bounce,* Chicago, Reilly & Lee, 1937 and Al Spink, "The Wrestling Trust," *Spink Sport Stories,* 1921; also see Mark S. Hewitt, "Gotch in the Klondike" http:/ /ejmas.com/jmanlyart_hewitt_0901.htm).

After Gotch, another important figure in the development of pro wrestling's *worked* style is Joseph Raymond "Toots" Mondt. Like Gotch, Mondt learned the wrestling *con* by touring with Farmer Burns' carnival troupe in the early 1900s and later organized a wrestling trust (monopoly) in about 1919 with Ed Strangler Lewis and Billy Sandow (Bauman). The enduring legacy of Mondt's "gold dust trio" is pro wrestling's secret argot - *wrestlespeak,* based on *carney.* See Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys, The*

Barnums of Bounce, Chicago, Reilly & Lee (1937) and Phantom of the Ring, "The Founding Father," *Wrestling Perspective,* vol. VIII, issue 68.

The wrestling business has tried to make money with football stars since 1924, when University of Nebraska footballer Wayne "Big" Munn was recruited onto the mat by Mondt's partner Billy Sandow; although Munn was a terrible wrestler, Sandow guessed "He'll bring the college element into the game, and we'll make a lot of dough" (Griffin's *Fall Guys,* Chicago, Reilly & Lee, 1937). After Munn came Dartmouth football star Gus Sonnenberg who was *put over* as a world champion after a Boston match with Strangler Lewis in 1929, although Sonnenberg's legit sport credentials attracted press attention and, therefore, pro wrestling exposés (Boston Better Business Bureau, "The Sonnenberg Wrestling Racket," *The Bulletin,,* vol. I, no. 23, Nov. 19, 1929 and Stanislaus Zbyszko's "Look What They've Done to Wrestling," *True* magazine, August 1953). After Sonnenberg, the next famous footballer-turned wrestler was Bronko Nagurski, a Chicago Bears fullback in the 1930s permitted to beat Lou Thesz in 1939 for one world championship and lose it a year later to Ray Steele (Pete Sauer), related to George Sauer, Sr. and Jr., who coached and played respectively for the New York Jets.

One account of the *Saturday Evening Post's* sensational story accusing Bear Bryant and Wally Butts of conspiring to fix the 1962 Alabama-Georgia football game and the resulting libel trial is found in Mickey Herskowitz's *The Legend of Bear Bryant,* McGraw-Hill, 1987.

Chapter 3: Care and Feeding of a *Babyface*

Pro wrestling has used blood *(juicing*) for many years to help *suspend disbelief* and generate audience *heat.* Use of razor blades apparently started in the mid-1950s, possibly pioneered by Texas wrestler Danny McShane, and was revealed publicly by Dan Parker *(New York Daily Mirror,* Nov. 27, 1957). Generally, wrestlers do their own butchering - they *gig* themselves because the skill and intent of other wrestlers is not to be trusted. Wrestlers are specifically instructed to *juice* by the *booker,* and some wrestlers are

paid a little more to *gig* themselves. Blood money? Yes. An industry idiom is *Red Turns To Green*

- “If you bleed, you’ll draw money.” But *juice* can attract outside attention, as happened in 1972 when *Sports Illustrated* published a rare account of pro wrestling and revealed, “it has to be human blood . . . produced by a nick with a razor blade or sharp blade or sharp fingernail.” Under oath, promoter Roy Shire said, *“You give the customers enough blood, and you’ll draw nothing but money!”*

My own *juicing* incident of February 1969 in Columbus, Georgia was demanded by promoter Fred Ward but later proved to be a minor embarrassment to both Ward and other members of the wrestling establishment. At about the time *20/20* was broadcast nationally in February 1985, the ABC-TV affiliate in Columbus, Georgia (WTVW- TV, Channel 9) televised its own wrestling exposé entitled, *“Chokehold*

- *The Bout Outside The Ring”* on Feb. 19, 20 and 21, 1985. On that broadcast, Fred Ward was asked to respond specifically to my contention that he had told me I would never work for the NWA again after I refused to lose a match. On camera, Ward replied, “I never said that. *I never, ever had a conversation with that man*.” Ward repeated his bald lie for the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* on July 14, 1985 and he later testified under oath, “I never had an argument with Jim Wilson in my life. I never had a conversation with Mr. Wilson even pertaining to that subject [instructions to bleed]” (deposition of Fred Ward, April 21, 1981 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* no. C-79-1310A).

Background material for this description of Edward “The Sheik” Farhat is based on his deposition of Dec. 28, 1981 for *Angelo Poffo, et al., v. Nick Gulas, et al,* no. 79-147, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Kentucky, Lexington Division and Jim Freedman’s *Drawing Heat*, Windsor, Ontario: Black Moss Press, 1988.

Chapter 4: Power of the*Pencil*

This description of the 1997 Bret Hart double-cross by Vince McMahon is based on the reporting of David Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Sept. 1, 1997, Oct. 25, 1997, Nov. 10, 1997, Nov. 17, 1997, March 9, 1998) and the made-for-TV film *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, broadcast by Arts and Entertainment-TV on Dec. 20, 1998.

Although wrestling double-crosses are rare today, there were several in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Griffin's *Fall Guys* (1937). One famous double-cross involving Dick Shikat and Danno O'Mahoney was revealed in court proceedings (see *Joe Alvarez v. Richard Shikat and Al Haft*, U.S. District Court, Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, No. 1180, April 27, 1936); another famous double-cross involving Gorgeous George and Chief Don Eagle made headlines in 1950 when promoter Fred Kohler told George to "pin him if you can" on Kohler's TV program to diminish Eagle's popularity, a ploy that Kohler later admitted to the Justice Department (see "WRESTLING ENDS, THEN FIGHT IS ON," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 27, 1950). Double-crosses sometimes occur in the office, as happened when promoter LeRoy McGuirk got the *strap* off Ron Starr (described in *Bobby Eugene Nutt, a/k/a Ron Starr v. LeRoy McGuirk, d/b/a LeRoy McGuirk Wrestling, an Oklahoma Corporation, and LeRoy McGuirk Championship Wrestling, Inc., an Oklahoma Corporation*, no. C-80-673, Tulsa County District Court, State of Oklahoma (March 17, 1980); Starr's attorney, Patrick E. Carr, was interviewed in October, 1988). A more recent double-cross involved Wendi Richter and Spider Lady (Fabulous Moolah, Lillian Ellison) in 1985 when Vince McMahon, Jr., asked Moolah to pin Richter because of his contract dispute with Richter (who never worked for the WWF again).

Roy Shire's commentary about troublesome wrestlers is found in his deposition of Sept. 27, 1985 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.*, no. C-79-1310A. The California state investigation of Shire's own shoddy treatment of wrestlers was reported by Curley Grieve's "Matmen's Pay As Phony As Show," *San Francisco Examiner* (Aug. 22, 1962). About thirty years earlier, a minor scandal about wrestlers' meager *payoffs* hit the newspapers in New York City ("Wrestlers Paid $15 Each on $9,500 Gate," *New York Daily Mirror,* circa 1933, Tom Burke Collection, reprinted in J Michael Kenyon's WAWLI Papers, 2001).

Jim Barnett's description of how the NWA decided who should be its world champion is found in his deposition of Feb. 25, 1983 in connection with *Claude Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et, al,* no. C-82-902A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division. Financial data reported here for Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc. for 1973 through 1979 were subpoenaed in connection with my lawsuit *(James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* no. C-79-1310A). Other financial data are drawn from Crockett promotion documents subpoenaed in connection with *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.* as well as the deposition of Jerry Jarrett, Feb. 27, 1982 and the deposition of Joseph B. Blanchard, May 24, 1982, both for *James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.*, no. C-79-1310A. The testimony of Ron Garvin (Roger Barnes) cited here was given on Feb. 19, 1980 for *Angelo Poffo, et al, v. Nick Gulas, et al,* C-79-147, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Kentucky, Lexington Division. Robert Roop's testimony is drawn from his deposition of Feb. 19, 1980, also for *Poffo, et al. v. Gulas, et al.*

This account of Thunderbolt Patterson's wrestling career is based partly on Patterson's depositions of April 14, 1981 in *James M. Wilson v. Hosea Williams, et al,* C-9162, Superior Court, Fulton County, Georgia and on Feb. 21, 22 and Aug. 3, 1983 for *Claude Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al,* C-82-902a, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division. Apart from his own mistreatment, Thunderbolt Patterson was bothered by two related racial matters in pro wrestling: there were relatively few black wrestlers in an industry that attracted lots of black fans, especially in the south, and black wrestlers were rarely given major wrestling titles and generally performed before black audiences as *babyface Black Hopes.*

This description of the murder of wrestler Frank Goodish (Bruiser Brody) and subsequent legal developments is based on the docket file released to us by Chief Judge Ramon E. Gomez Colon *(El Pueblo de Puerto Rico v. Jose Huertas Gonzales, c/p El Invader (Homicidio Voluntario),* Crim. Num. G88-2973, Estado Libre Asociado De Puerto Rico, Tribunal General De Justica, Tribunal Superior, Sala de Bayamon (Nov. 2, 1988). Wrestler Bobby "Hangman" Jaggers, who was in the locker room the night Frank was murdered but didn't see the assault, said the argument between Frank and Huertas was over Frank's refusal to pay Puerto Rican

taxes before leaving the island, not a booking instruction. Jaggers expressed his view that local promoters “paid off the judge” (*Ringside Live* interview with Jaggers, Dec. 11, 2000 on wrestlingclassics.com).

Chapter 5: Blackmail and Blackball

Background material for this description of Jim Barnett is drawn from U.S. Justice Department documents pertaining to the 1956 consent decree as well as Barnett's depositions of Feb. 23, 1983 in *Claude Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.*, C-82-902A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division, and Feb. 4, 1982 in *Poffo, et al., v. Gulas, et al*, C-79-147, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Kentucky, Lexington Division, and Sept. 14, 1979 in *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.*, C-79-1310A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division, and the deposition of Joe Blanchard on May 24, 1982 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al*, C-79-1310A.

According to several veteran wrestlers from the 1950s, Barnett's personal interest in wrestlers was well known inside The Business in the 1950s. Wrestler Antone "Ripper" Leone said he was told by Benito "The Little Flower" Gardini (Don Serio) about "horrible orgies involving oral sex and sodomy" in the Chicago office. Ripper said, "Anybody who went into the Chicago office knew what they did - that was the price they were willing to pay to become stars." When Barnett promoted wrestling in Indiana and Kentucky, he lived in Lexington, Kentucky, where he became acquainted with my friend Jason who said he was one of many collegiate athletes recruited for party entertainment. Former wrestler Eddie Faieta said, "When I met Barnett in Lexington, his homosexuality was widely known, especially after he [Barnett] was caught in drag at the Mardi Gras."

Shortly after Doyle died in 1968, Barnett's Australian luck ran its course when a new Labor government closed tax loopholes. With Eddie Graham's help, Barnett was appointed NWA recording secretary in 1970. In the years afterward, Barnett's NWA ascendancy was rapid: he was appointed chairman of the NWA's rules committee in 1972; a year later, Barnett bought stock in both the NWA's Georgia and Florida promotions. Eight months later, he was elected to the NWA's board of directors and a year afterward, he was elected NWA first vice president. After Sam

Muchnick stepped down from the NWA presidency, his successor Jack Adkisson (Fritz von Erich) asked Barnett to be the NWA's secretary-treasurer and, more importantly, the NWA's world champion's *booker.* The champion's *booker* position placed Barnett at the center of wrestling's power network: he could give or withhold the NWA's brightest star from other NWA members, and he did. For nine glorious years until 1983, Barnett attended every NWA meeting where *strap* changes were decided, and he *booked every championship match* during those years wrestled by NWA world champions *Jack Brisco, Terry Funk, Harley Race, Dusty Rhodes, Giant Baba, Tommy Rich* and *Ric Flair.*

When Jim Barnett testified in 1979 about the circumstances of my Australian experience with him, his response was nervous. When he was asked, "Did Mr. James Wilson wrestle for you in Australia?" Barnett replied, *"He* [Wilson] *was sent to Australia to wrestle for me for like a 14-week term, but he was terminated at the end of eight weeks"* Barnett was then asked, "What was the reason for that termination?" Barnett stopped, interrupting the deposition and asked to speak off the record with his attorney. After that consultation, Barnett whispered, *"Wilson had to leave Australia because of his promiscuity with the airline stewardesses"* (Deposition of James E. Barnett, Sept. 14, 1979, for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* C-79-1310A). Roy Shire's sworn testimony about the 1974 NWA annual meetings where he discussed my blacklisting with Jim Barnett is from Shire's deposition of Sept. 27, 1985 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.* C-79-1310A.

Chapter 6: Battle For Atlanta

The events described in this chapter are based on my own experience and court papers produced in connection with Gunkel Enterprises, Inc. v. National Wrestling Alliance, Georgia Championship Wrestling, Paul Jones, Fred Ward, Edward Gossett, Lester Welch, Roy Lee Welch, F Jack Brisco, William F Watts, Jr., Tim Woods and Ronald Reed, C- 76-2059, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division.

Ronnie Garvin's testimony about Jim Barnett's role as the *godfather of wrestling* is located in his deposition of Feb. 19, 1980 for *Angelo Poffo, et al, v. Nick Gulas, et al,* C-79-147, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Kentucky, Lexington Division. Barnett's request of Bob Roop to *stretch* Thunderbolt Patterson and me is documented in Roop's sworn testimony of Feb. 19, 1980 in *Poffo, et al. v. Gulas, et al.* Financial data reported in this chapter pertaining to Georgia Championship Wrestling for 1973 and 1974 are drawn from subpoenaed records and the deposition of Jim Barnett taken on Feb. 25, 1983 for *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.*

The Battle For Atlanta was waged out of public view, except for two local newspaper accounts: "Kindly Paul, Spunky Ann Square Off," *Atlanta Constitution* (Jan. 28, 1973) and Jim Huber, "The Rasslin' Road," *Atlanta Journal* (May 9, 1973). About 17 years after The Battle For Atlanta ended, Bill Watts provided another version of that wrestling war: *"He* [Ray Gunkel] *had started to double-cross his partners, Paul Jones and Buddy Fuller . . . the Gunkels decided to take it all . . . That is supposedly what he was preparing to do when he had a heart attack and died"* Watts said Eddie Graham brought him (Watts) to Georgia as booker because *"Eddie recognized my talent and promotional ability. Eddie recognized, as he called it, a budding genius'. . .* he had me actually running the talent in Atlanta . . . he gave me ten percent [ownership in Georgia Championship Wrestling] and he gave Jack Brisco some - *not in order to manipulate Brisco* - Jack was the young star that was going to become the world champion, and Jack had a tremendous rapport with talent and he was great

in the ring . . . and Jack, we always had an unbelievable closeness. *You could always count on Jack and Gerald."*

According to Watts, Jim Barnett ended The Battle For Atlanta this way: "Barnett was one of the big names when I got into wrestling . . . Jim [Barnett] knew how to position himself and was a mystery man to an extent with his wealth and he knew how to get to business people . . . He would go on with his little ways, his little effeminate ways. He was no threat to people and Jim was intense because he had the traits, he was a master of making people turn on each other to his own advantage. And he constantly did that. He did some big, big things in Australia. He went down there and took it and had the airlines paying the fares. He really did well with it," Watts said. In Atlanta, "Barnett came in and became the major stockholder and he pulled the political things to sink Ann's ship. We had already pretty well beat her, but Barnett got us in Augusta. I mean he did some things that just killed Ann . . . Barnett had the bankroll and could do things politically and could finish off the Gunkel situation. And that was the first antitrust suit that was big in wrestling. We didn't realize we were being set up. It was all bullshit, completely bullshit. There was never anybody threatened. That was just bullshit. But there was a settlement and Barnett negotiated himself out of the settlement . . . when he was supposed to be negotiating the settlement of his famous antitrust lawsuit, he didn't protect the other stockholders, but he protected himself He sold everybody else down the tube. Georgia Championship had to pay it all out even though he was making the money" (Wade Keller, "Bill Watts," Pro Wrestling Torch Annual, Summer, 1991, pp. 8, 14-15).

Chapter 7: Unmasking The Conspiracy

The source for this description of the United States Justice Department's investigation of the wrestling industry in 1955 and 1956 is more than 3,000 pages of the Antitrust Division's file on the National Wrestling Alliance and over 300 pages of FBI field reports made available under Freedom of Information Act requests. A Justice Department in-house summary of this investigation is a 90-page memorandum entitled *"Wrestling: Recommendation For Criminal Prosecution"* (Aug. 25, 1955) which documents the NWA's illegal business tactics from 1948 through 1955. The findings, conclusions and conditions of the Justice Department's consent decree (*United States v. National Wrestling Alliance)* are spelled out in a six-page document filed on October 15, 1956 in U.S. District Court, Southern District of Iowa, Central Division, civil action no. 3-729; attached are signatures of 35 NWA promoters who consented to the Justice Department's decree.

It should be noted that *blacklisting* was just one of the NWA's illegal business practices discovered by the Justice investigation, although the historical evidence shows that *blacklisting* existed in pro wrestling *before* the NWA was formed in 1948 - even *before* the more famous "Hollywood Blacklist" of at least 324 blacklisted writers and actors (and later, school teachers and college professors from coast to coast) was established by Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947, a chapter of American history that has inspired dozens of books and several films and plays. In pro wrestling, however, *blacklisting* attracted less attention with at least one exception: in 1945, a New York-based weekly sports tabloid named *Sportsweek* published a wrestling exposé headlined, BEST WRESTLERS IN THE NATION ARE OUTLAWED, GIVEN NO WORK BY THE PHONEY CLIQUES IN CONTROL and it identified eight blacklisted wrestlers - *Ralph "Ruffy" Silverstein, Jack Sherry, Wladek Zbyszko, Roy Dunn, John Pesek, Ben Sherman, John Evko* and *Billy Demetral*- and *Sportsweek* blasted politicians and law enforcement officials for their indifference. Two years later in 1947, *Sportsweek* editorialized, "If New York's Governor

Thomas E. Dewey is looking for splash headlines in an effort to advance his cause in the 1948 race for the White House, it is my sincere recommendation that he take up the not altogether insignificant professional wrestling racket in the Empire State." At the time, President Truman was preparing for his reelection campaign against the New York governor.

The 1950s Justice Department investigation used the usual tactics employed in white collar crimes: it seized thousands of NWA file documents and interviewed dozens of witnesses, both promoters and wrestlers (although many wrestlers contacted by the FBI were reluctant to be identified) and placed telephone wiretaps on several wrestling offices around the nation. When Justice investigators learned the NWA's mat monopoly was not a happy conspiracy (born of the cutthroat carnival business where its members fought among themselves as much as with competitors), they located informants who provided valuable insider information. One important informant was John J. Doyle, former NWA member who once held the management contract with Gorgeous George (and later became the business partner of Jim Barnett). Another informant was Frank "Sammy" Menacker, former wrestler and El Paso promoter and NWA member until 1955 (who later worked in the office and on TV for the Indianapolis-based promotion owned by Dick The Bruiser and Wilbur Snyder). A third informant was Portland, Oregon's independent promoter Ted Thye whose attempts to promote wrestling in Oregon, Hawaii, Japan and New Zealand in the early 1950s were killed by the NWA. Thye's brother was Senator Edward J. Thye of Minnesota, one of the first persons interviewed by Justice investigators in May 1955, shortly after the NWA's Cal Eaton flew to Washington to meet with him in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the investigation. There may have been other FBI and Justice Department informants, but their identities still are protected.

The 1950s Justice Department investigation of the NWA discovered several *wrestling turf wars* during the late 1940s to mid 1950s; one of these was a battle in Texas between the NWA's Morris Siegel and *outlaw* Dizzy Davis (1949-1950), a later Texas war involved Siegel and NWA *outlaw* Ed McLemore (1950-1954), a third was the California *combine*'s war with various non-NWA competitors (which actually started the entire investigation, 1953-1955), a fourth was a multi-state wrestling war involving the NWA's Joe "Toots" Mondt (1951-1954) and a fifth was the

Chicago turf war between the NWA's Chicago office (headed by Fred Kohler and his young partner Jim Barnett) and the owner of Chicago's Rainbo Arena (1949-1955).

Justice Department files paint a revealing picture of how pro wrestling's future *godfather* cut his teeth in The Business under Fred Kohler's tutelage. When Barnett went to work for Kohler as editor of *Wrestling as You Like It*, Kohler's Chicago office already controlled a huge segment of TV wrestling around the nation with Chicago's WGN- TV and the DuMont TV network. As WGN-TV went on the air in 1948, it assigned announcer Jack Brickhouse to Kohler's wrestling shows three nights a week (from the Marigold Arena, the Madison Arena and the Rainbo Arena); with a $100,000 a year DuMont TV network contract, Kohler's *live* Saturday night Marigold show reached midwest and east coast markets, often with ratings of 50 or better (see Brickhouse's autobiography *Thanks For Listening*, South Bend, Indiana, Diamond Communications, 1986). With the DuMont-TV network as his battering ram, Kohler jockeyed for position to take over the nation's wrestling business. It didn't take long for Kohler to promote Barnett from editor to business partner with Kohler's International Wrestling Agency (which booked Kohler's TV stars into other territories) and Sports Publicity Institute (which published and distributed wrestling calendars); Kohler and Barnett also jointly purchased the Indianapolis promotion from Billy Thom. Although Barnett was not then an NWA member, he was asked in 1950 to be its recording secretary at NWA annual meetings; by 1954, Barnett was still not an NWA member but was voting in NWA deliberations.

Justice Department files suggest that 20 years before he waged war in The Battle For Atlanta, Barnett learned wrestling's war tactics during Kohler's nasty Chicago fight with *outlaw* promoter Leonard Schwartz, a local accountant who bought the Rainbo Arena in 1949 and started his own wrestling promotion. When Schwartz's application for NWA membership was rejected, he established a secret partnership with "Toots" Mondt, Jim Londos and Ray Fabiani who persuaded NWA Ohio promoter Al Haft to supply talent to Schwartz. But Haft also was providing Kohler and Barnett with wrestlers, one of whom was Haft's American Wrestling Association champion Don Eagle who Kohler and Barnett had *pushed* on their TV shows. The trouble started when Haft's personal management contract with

Eagle made it difficult for Kohler and Barnett to book Don Eagle in Kohler's territory - which is why Kohler scripted the famous Don Eagle double-cross by Gorgeous George in 1950, *to diminish Eagle's value to Haft* (Kohler boldly confessed to Justice Department investigators several years later).

Shortly afterward, Schwartz signed a contract with ABC-TV to produce kinescopes of Rainbo Arena wrestling shows which ABC-TV sold across the country; when Schwartz again applied for NWA membership and showed his ABC-TV contract, he was approved and the NWA declared Chicago an "open city" (both Kohler and Schwartz were expected to share NWA wrestlers). Furious, Kohler resigned from the NWA (later, he asked to be taken back) but Kohler's NWA clout prevented Schwartz from booking either NWA world heavyweight champion Lou Thesz or Verne Gagne, the NWA's junior heavyweight champion. Then the rough stuff started: in retaliation, Schwartz contacted Al Haft (who didn't approve of Thesz) and booked Haft's *world champion* - Roy Dunn, a *shooter* who'd been blacklisted by the NWA for not *doing the right thing* in prior matches with Dick Hutton and Thesz. But when Schwartz advertised Dunn in Chicago as holding the Ed "Strangler" Lewis belt and Ralph "Ruffy" Silverstein as NWA champion, the NWA had Strangler Lewis write a letter to the *Chicago Tribune,* saying there was no such thing as an *Ed Strangler Lewis belt* and the NWA told Schwartz to resign his NWA membership if he couldn't go along with the rules. Schwartz refused to resign but he still couldn't get the NWA to book Lou Thesz for his Chicago shows, a NWA blackout that continued until 1953 when Schwartz formally told the NWA its business practices were *monopolistic and in restraint of trade.*

At about this time, Schwartz told Muchnick he'd bought out his partners (Mondt, Londos and Fabiani) and was now working with Jim Barnett (which may or may not have been true), and Muchnick then booked Lou Thesz for a Schwartz wrestling show at his Rainbo Arena two weeks later. When Kohler learned that Thesz had been booked for his cross-town competitor, he exploded, as did the DuMont network and WGN-TV whose manager Frank Schreiber called Muchnick, asking why the NWA gave Thesz to ABC-TV. Muchnick told WGN and Kohler that he'd "postponed his [Thesz] appearance" at the Rainbo for more than two years, and couldn't press it further. Afterward, Kohler and Barnett retaliated against

the NWA: Barnett told Kohler they ought to create their own United States Heavyweight Champion, an idea suggested by wrestler Billy “Whipper” Watson. And the ploy had approval of the Illinois Athletic Commission chairman Joe Triner who “helped” Kohler, according to Muchnick’s correspondence.

The Kohler-Barnett *strap angle* involved creating a new belt which was promptly wrapped around their new DuMont-TV star, Verne Gagne. Kohler offered Gagne to other NWA territorial promoters for the same deal that Thesz got: 10% of the gate to Gagne *and 2% to Gagne’s road manager, Jim Barnett.* With DuMont-TV paving the way, imposter Gagne and his manager Barnett toured the country, including the northeastern region controlled by Joe “Toots” Mondt (whose gambling debts led him to sign a deal with Kohler and Barnett to book Mondt’s cities for 60% of the gates). By February 1954, the *New York Daily Mirrors* Dan Parker noted Gagne was being “played up on a par with Thesz,” and wrote “Kohler is the dominating figure right now because of his Marigold show,” getting 60% of the Garden shows that was routinely collected by “Kohler’s man Saturday” - “watchdog Jim Barnett.” By now, Kohler and Barnett’s national tour included several other contract wrestlers (Antonino Rocca, Hans Schmidt and Pat O’Connor) but what attracted Parker’s attention was where Barnett stayed while in New York City - at the city’s most expensive Waldorf Hotel while in town just long enough “to see that nobody pays them off in Russian Roubles,” wrote Parker.

As Kohler and Barnett expanded their promotion into other territories in 1954, they asked Muchnick for permission to use Thesz in areas where he was better known than Gagne. But NWA members disapproved of the Chicago office’s new championship *strap,* voting 22 to 11 to stop calling Gagne “U.S. Heavyweight Champion,” and Muchnick refused to book Thesz on Kohler-Barnett shows. In retaliation, Kohler told Muchnick that Thesz would miss out on some good paydays and threatened to *blacklist* other wrestlers who worked on the same shows where Thesz appeared. NWA members saw the Kohler-Barnett plan for what it was: an attempted takeover of The Business - about 30 years before Vince McMahon, Jr. actually pulled it off, with the help of Jim Barnett.

The rough tactics used by Kohler and Barnett impressed the Justice Department: one wrestler under contract to Kohler and Barnett’s

International Wrestling Agency was Antonino Rocca whose contract(Kohler admitted to Justice investigators) guaranteed Rocca $80,000 a year but after Kohler and Barnett took 20% and Mondt took another slice, all that was left for Rocca was $25,000 a year. Other victims of the Kohler-Barnett alliance were other NWA promoters. Justice Department files contain a 1953 letter to Kohler from Des Moines promoter "Pinky" George in which George complained about "the *attempt of your partner Barnett trying to cut in my territory and withhold star TV talent*' and that " *Jim* [Barnett] *pulled out* [wrestler] *Bill Melby in spite of the fact he had been advertised.* Twenty-five years later in a 1979 deposition, Barnett was shown the 1953 Pinky George letter and asked what *cut in my territory* meant. Under oath, Barnett replied, *"I have no idea"* (deposition of James Barnett, Sept. 14, 1979 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* C-79-1310A).

The Chicago wrestling war ended in early 1955 when Schwartz lost his ABC-TV contract and after three years, Thesz finally returned to Kohler's Marigold shows. But then Kohler's $100,000 a year contract with DuMont was canceled, Schwartz resigned from the NWA and Kohler and Barnett had a falling out. Barnett moved to Lexington, Kentucky (where he became acquainted with my friend Jason) and opened a booking office at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis and promoted wrestling in Indiana and Kentucky. In the late '50s, Barnett established a promotional joint venture with John J. Doyle (who previously held the management contract on Gorgeous George as a member of the NWA's "California combine") named Barnett-Doyle, Inc. The two of them promoted wrestling in Kentucky and Indiana and also Cincinnati, Denver, Detroit and Milwaukee but their TV wrestling shows aired far and wide - Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Portland, Oregon and San Francisco. At about this time Barnett and Doyle were accused by NWA members of trying to take over wrestling on a national scale with their TV wrestling shows followed by promoting arena shows in the cities where their TV programs aired.

Shortly afterward, Barnett sold his Ohio-Michigan territory to The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) for $50,000 and the Colorado area to Gagne. Barnett left the U.S. in 1964 for Australia where he and Doyle and a new partner (his college friend James F. Oates of Chicago), promoted *World Championship Wrestling* on Australian TV and in its arenas. Before his

death in 1966, Kohler secretly sold his Chicago promotion to Verne Gagne and Dick “The Bruiser” Afflis, although former wrestling photographer Bob Luce served as the promotion’s *frontman* since both Gagne and Bruiser were Chicago’s perennial wrestling stars. John Doyle died in 1968, shortly before Barnett left Australia to go to Atlanta; Jim Oates continued his financial partnership with Barnett until Georgia Championship Wrestling was sold to Vince McMahon, Jr.

The 1950s Justice Department investigation also found that the NWA’s rough tactics created problems outside the wrestling business. When the Dallas Sportatorium burned down in May 1953, NWA boss Sam Muchnick received a threatening letter from W. T. Cox, who owned a factory near the Sportatorium. Cox wrote: *“The next fire in wrestling in Texas is the one just now starting, which is being built under the NWA . . . it will get so hot that officers of the NWA will only be welcomed in Texas by officers of the law”* In California, a legislative investigation of NWA wrestling inadvertently stumbled into Olympic Auditorium promoter Cal Eaton’s criminal tax fraud when it discovered Eaton routinely demanded wrestlers sign blank receipts showing they were paid a certain percentage of the gate, although Eaton never paid them more than $35 to $40. Eaton’s legal problems enlarged a year later when he testified at another investigatory committee established by his son’s father-in-law, California Governor Goodwin Knight. At that hearing, Eaton admitted association with the 1950s underworld figure and reputed boxing czar Frankie Carbo and Los Angeles mobster Mickey Cohen who fixed boxing matches (“Gangland Rollcall Marks Boxing Quiz,” *Los Angeles Herald-Express,* March 21, 1956 and “Link to N.Y. Underworld Voiced in L.A. Ring Probe,” *Pasadena Independent,* March 22, 1956).

After its investigation of the wrestling industry, Justice Department attorneys concluded they had collected a “world of evidence” of NWA wrongdoing - the “engineered” mergers of competing promotions (St. Louis, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles), putting other promoters out of business, blacklisting, “whipping wrestlers into line by evil means” and keeping Ted Thye out of Japan, said one summary memo. But there was an in-house argument about whether to seek a criminal indictment or file a civil lawsuit, or both. Justice attorneys also considered narrowing the number of defendants to the seven worst violators - *Paul Bowser·, Jim*

Crockett, Sr., Cal Eaton, Al Haft, Fred Kohler, Sam Muchnick and Morris Siegel. Ultimately, it was decided to forgo a criminal indictment (because of the *economic insignificance* of the wrestling industry and the need for Department manpower on an oil antitrust case, it said) and instead a civil suit was filed against 35 past and present NWA members. Justice Department attorneys said if the NWA did not respond appropriately to a civil suit that enjoined it from monopolistic practices, then a criminal indictment would follow (although it was several more years before the Justice Department insisted on NWA bylaws revisions and NWA compliance with the 1956 judgment wasn't reviewed formally until 16 years later in 1972).

In drafting the Government's 1956 complaint against the NWA, Justice lawyers made one concession to NWA boss Sam Muchnick. At Muchnick's request, Justice attorneys agreed to delete the following language - *"determine the wrestler who shall hold such titles"* Muchnick explained to Justice attorneys that such language *"will lend support to the idea that wrestling matches are fixed"* Justice lawyers winked and said, "Fine." According to wrestling folklore, Muchnick's close association with Missouri Congressman Mel Price facilitated his negotiations with the Justice Department. Although Muchnick generally was respected by many wrestlers as a promoter who did not cheat them on *payoffs,* Justice Department evidence shows Muchnick was at the center of the NWA's illegal business tactics.

In addition to Justice Department documents, the 1959 Virginia wrestling scandal also is reported in "Monopoly Claimed: Commission Hears Wrestling Charges," *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Nov. 26, 1959) and "Wrestling Monopoly Studied: Probe Faces Cooling Off Period," *Richmond News Leader* (Nov. 26, 1959). The corruption allegation concerning Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee (who died on Aug. 10, 1963) and other assertions of Donald Pruitt are described in the sworn deposition of Joseph Donald Pruitt (April 17, 1973) in *Joseph Donald Pruitt, et al, v. Nick Gulas, et al.* no. 7542-A, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Kentucky. Related testimony is located in the deposition of William Grundy Davis (Oct. 15, 1973) for *Joseph Donald*

Pruitt, et al., v. Nick Gulas, et al. no. 7542-A, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Kentucky. Additional evidence concerning the personal

finances, gambling debts and corruption of Estes Kefauver is described in Stephen Fox's *Blood and Power, Organized Crime in Twentieth Century America,* New York: Wm. Morrow, 1989, pp. 304305.

This description of the Government's continuing investigation of the wrestling industry in 1973 and 1974 is based on Justice Department and FBI documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. This description of wrestler Kurt von Poppenheim's (Jack Poppenheim) futile effort to obtain a promoter license in Oregon is based on both Justice Department records and Poppenheim's court documents which include: *Kurt von Poppenheim v. Portland Boxing and Wrestling Commission,* No. 298798, Circuit Court of the State of Oregon for the County of Multnomah (Feb. 21, 1964) and his Oregon Supreme Court appeal (407 P. 2nd 853) decided on Nov. 17, 1965 and *Kurt von Poppenheim v. Portland Boxing and Wrestling Commission, National Wrestling Alliance and Mount Hood Radio and Television Broadcasting, Inc, National Wrestling Association of America, Inc and Don Owen Sports, Inc.,* No. 71-612, U.S. Supreme Court (Oct. 1971). Other sources for this chapter are *Frank Pasquale v. Alva (Cal) Eaton, Hugh Nichols, Mike J. Hirsch, Robert Eaton,* no. 635,619, Superior Court of California for Los Angeles (1954) and *Harold C. Myers v. P. L. George and National Wrestling Alliance,* nos. 17046 and 17046, U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit (Dec. 19, 1963). The description of wrestler Antone "Ripper" Leone's experiences is based on interviews with Leone in July and August 1987 and Justice Department documents whose release was authorized by Leone.

Chapter 8: *Shooting* Matches

The first legal action against the NWA wrestling monopoly after the 1956 consent decree was an antitrust lawsuit filed by Harold C. "Sonny" Myers in 1961. Myers wrestled in the Midwest and south in the 1940s, and bought a carnival in 1953 to stage wrestling matches (*"ad shows")* for which Sam Muchnick required him to pay a booking fee to NWA Des Moines promoter P. L. "Pinky" George. Later, George stopped providing Myers with wrestlers and told Meyers if he didn't stop promoting, he would

be “hurt all over the country as a wrestler.” George also threatened Myers’ wrestlers: if they continued working for Myers, they would never wrestle again for an NWA member. Myers’s lawsuit resulted in a favorable jury verdict, but the decision was overturned on a procedural technicality by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in December 1963. A new trial was ordered, but the case was not tried again (*Harold C. Myers v. P. L. George and National Wrestling Alliance,* nos. 17046 and 17046, U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, Dec. 19, 1963).

Allegations of athletic commission corruption in Kentucky and Tennessee were aired in sworn testimony of Joseph Donald Pruitt (April 17, 1973) and William Grundy Davis (Oct. 15, 1973) taken for *Joseph Donald Pruitt v. Nick Gulas, Roy Welch, Wilbur Snyder, Richard Afflis, Sam Muchnick and the National Wrestling Alliance,* No. C-7542-A, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Kentucky (Jan., 1973). Pruitt’s attorney, William T. Warner was interviewed on October 28, 1988.

This chapter’s description of Eddie Einhorn’s experiences in wrestling promotion is based on documents filed in *International Wrestling Association, Inc. and John Powers v. Jim Crockett Promotions, Inc. and Winston-Salem,, N.C.,* No. C-C76-32, U.S. District Court, Western District of North Carolina (Jan. 26, 1976); an affidavit of John Powers of Jan. 24, 1976 and an interview with Eddie Einhorn conducted on Oct. 28, 1987. Einhorn’s experiences also are described in Bob Roop’s deposition of Feb. 19, 1980 in *Poffo, et al. v. Gulas, et al.*

My first lawsuit against the wrestling business was filed on September 30, 1976 in James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, Paul Jones, Tom Renesto, James Barnett, Fred Ward, Eddie Graham a/k/a Edward Gossett, Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc. f/k/a Midsouth Sports, Inc. f/k/a ABC Booking, Inc., no. C-76-1625A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division. My second lawsuit was filed on July, 17, 1979 (James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, Paul Jones, Tom Renesto, James Barnett, Fred Ward, Eddie Graham a/k/a Edward Gossett, Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc., f/k/a Midsouth

Sports, Inc., f/k/a ABC Booking, no. C-79-1310A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division).

This description of Carl Sanders' political and legal careers in Georgia is based in part on Jill Abramson's "'Cuff Links Carl' Builds An Empire," *The American Lawyer* (Sept. 1982). Most of the day-today legal work for Georgia Championship Wrestling was performed by Carl Sanders' law partner Tench Coxe. Coxe's sworn denial that my dismissal of the suit against the NWA was *uncounselled* is found in Coxe's sworn deposition of April 23, 1981 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al,* (1979), but the facts are otherwise. Four years before that deposition of Oct. 28, 1977, Tench Coxe became an officer of Georgia Championship Wrestling, which created a conflict of interest to his legal representation of Georgia Championship. Later, the same conflict of interest arose when attorney John Mraz represented Jim Crockett Promotions and nonetheless continued to represent the Crocketts in various legal matters.

Ann Gunkel's antitrust suit was filed on December 17, 1976 in Gunkel Enterprises, Inc. v. National Wrestling Alliance, Inc., Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc., f/k/a Midsouth Sports, Inc., Paul Jones, Fred Ward, Edward Gossett a/k/a Eddie Graham,, Lester Welch, Roy Lee Welch, Edward Welch a/k/a Buddy Fuller, F. Jack Brisco, William F. Watts, Jr., a/k/a Cowboy Bill Watts, Tim Woods a/k/a Mr. Wrestling and Ronald Reed a/k/aBuddy Colt, no. C-76-2059A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division.

This description of the Poffo family's experience in promoting in opposition to the NWA is based on documents filed on August 22, 1979 in Angelo Poffo, Randy Poffo, Lanny Poffo and International Championship Wrestling, Inc. v. Nick Gulas, George Gulas, d/b/a Nick Gulas Enterprises, Eddy Graham, d/b/a Georgia Championship Wrestling, Ed Farhat d/b/a Farhat Enterprises, Wilbur Snyder and Richard Afflis d/b/a Championship Wrestling, Verne Gagne, Jerry Jarrett, Buddy Fuller, d/b/a Southeastern Wrestling Inc, Robert Geigel and National Wrestling Alliance, no. 79-147, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Kentucky, Lexington Division. Also see "Poffos' Lawsuit Hits Promoters," The Tennessean (Aug. 15, 1979).

The depositions of The Sheik, Ronnie Garvin and Bob Roop quoted in this chapter are those of Edward Farhat (Dec. 28, 1981), Roger Barnes a/k/a

Ronnie Garvin (Feb. 19, 1980) and Robert Roop (Feb. 19, 1980), all for *Poffo, et al., v. Gulas, et al.* Both Garvin and Roop later *recanted* their sworn testimony when they became two of the Poffos' disappearing witnesses.

Thunderbolt Patterson's experiences in 1975 and 1976 are described in his depositions of August 4, 1981 in *Wilson v. Hosea Williams, et al.* and August 3, 1983 for *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.* His wrestling experiences of 1977 through 1981 are described in his depositions of February 21 and 22, 1983 for *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.* The involvement of Atlanta radio and TV television personality Beau Bock (Walter Maher) in our IWL wrestling promotion is documented in Maher's deposition of February 23, 1983 for *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.*

This chapter's descriptions of NWA annual meetings for 1973, 1974 and 1981 are based on the recorded minutes for those meetings. The Sheik's (Eddie Farhat) sworn testimony about his blacklisting was given in his deposition for *Poffo, et al., v. Gulas, et al.* on Dec. 28, 1981. Knowing that blacklisting was illegal, wrestling promoters always denied doing it, even in court proceedings. For example, Jim Barnett said under oath he could not recall the NWA's 1981 meeting at which The Sheik (Eddie Farhat) was blacklisted, although minutes of that NWA meeting show Barnett not only in attendance but joining others in blacklisting Eddie Farhat; NWA documents also show that it was Barnett who filed the *grievance* against Farhat in the first place. Under oath, Barnett testified: *"I did not participate completely in the meeting, no, because I was in a wheelchair in pain"* He added, "*Three days prior to the meeting I was staying at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles, Beverly Hills. I fell. I had a suite that had an upstairs bedroom and a downstairs living room.. About 10:00 at night I craved a Tab for some unknown reason. I went down the stairs. I fell. I fell on my way on my left ankle. I was taken to Cedars- Sinai Hospital"* He testified, 'I was *at* the meeting, but I was not *in* the meeting room. I came into the meeting room a little late, because I had trouble getting someone to wheel me in the wheelchair. *And this discussion* [about blacklisting The Sheik], *I don't know. I remember he* [The Sheik] *was given, according to the minutes, a suspension. I don't think he was voted out. Does it say voted*

out?" (deposition of James Barnett for *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.*, Aug. 9, 1983).

When Bill Watts was asked under oath, "Have you ever heard of anybody blackballing Jim Wilson?" he answered, "*What is that? Is that a male and female situation with the opposite race? What is blackballing? No, I don't know of anybody that has even been blacklisted, period, and I have been wrestling twenty years. There is no such thing.. That is like saying there is a bogeyman. Have you ever seen Santa Claus?"* (deposition of William F. Watts, June 24, 1982 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.).* Three years later, Vincent Kennedy McMahon (Vince, Jr.) was asked, *"Have you ever heard of any wrestler having been blackballed by one or more promoters who were members of the NWA?"* Under oath, McMahon replied, *"No."* McMahon was then asked, "Have you *ever* heard of *any* wrestler being blackballed or blacklisted at *any* time?" Before McMahon could reply, his attorney instructed McMahon not to answer (deposition of Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Aug. 1, 1985 for *James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.*, no. C-79- 1310A); as noted earlier, McMahon's father Vincent John James McMahon was cited for contempt of the 1956 consent judgment and sued for $300,000 for monopolistic practices and *blacklisting* and later prohibited from promoting for six months in 1960.

The NWA's strategy for defending against my lawsuit was to locate witnesses who would discredit me as a poor wrestler and *drug abuser.* Bill Watts testified: *"He* [Wilson] *certainly never was a commodity that could be marketed,"* and Watts added, *"You have a problem with some people with drugs Jim Wilson often smoked, and was high when he got to the matches . . . He was never considered a great wrestler . . . Jim Wilson hasn't made near the impact on this business as he thinks he has,'* Another wrestler who testified against me was Ernie Ladd, then wrestling for Bill Watts. In a deposition (that Bill Watts *attended)* Ernie swore under oath that he never wrestled me, although I have videotape (still shown on *ESPN Classics)* to prove him wrong. Ernie said he *"didn't see a lot of skills in Wilson performing as a wrestler. I just couldn 't see him being main event."* Ernie seemed to forget that he and I once wrestled *each other* in a main event, an occasion remembered because he told me after our match I was

“one of the best *babyfaces*” he’d worked with (deposition of Ernie Ladd, June 24, 1982 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance et al.).*

Financial data reported here concerning wrestler *payoffs* by Georgia Championship Wrestling are drawn from GCW documents subpoenaed in *Patterson v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, et al.* Background material for this description of Ted Turner’s broadcasting empire and its involvement with the wrestling business is based partly on: Roger Vaughan’s “Ted Turner’s True Talent,” *Esquire* (Oct. 10, 1978): 35-48; Joseph B. Cumming, Jr., “Ted Turner: Captain Outrageous,” *Saturday Evening Post* (Oct. 1980): 67-69; Richard Zoglin, “The Pioneer of Cable-TV News,” *Saturday Evening Post* (Nov. 1981): 32-36, and Christian Williams, *Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way: The Story of Ted Turner,* New York: Times Books, 1981. Brian Oldfield’s photo appeared on the September 1, 1975 cover of *Sports Illustrated.* Our 1981 Omni show was publicized by “WILSON, PATTERSON RETURN TO GEORGIA MAT SUNDAY,” *Atlanta Journal* (May 3, 1981).

Chapter 9: Political Sleeperholds

Seattle newspaper columnist Emmett Watson drew parallels between wrestling and politics - *"both are lathered with propaganda, fibs, slogans, boasts and sound bites"* ("Wrestling and Politics: Is there Really a Difference?", *Seattle Times,* Sept. 21, 1999). Legend has it that Frank Gotch attended the 1913 inauguration of Woodrow Wilson and Ed "Strangler" Lewis visited Calvin Coolidge at the White House; Gorgeous George is said to have opened the 1952 Republican national convention; President Harry Truman's wife Bess was a confessed wrestling fan and wrestling promoter Jack Adkisson attended several Republican national conventions in the 1970s and 1980s; promoter Paul Boesch of Houston attended the inauguration of George H. W. Bush, who invited Ric Flair to the White House for a visit. More recently, The Rock (Dwayne Johnson) spoke at the Republican National Convention in August 2000, and Ernie "Big Cat" Ladd was a visible audience member at one of the Bush-Gore televised presidential debates during the 2000 election campaign.

President Jimmy Carter's nomination of Jim Barnett to the National Council on the Arts was reported by the *Washington Post* on April 3, 1980; during the Carter administration, Barnett and a man closely associated with the White House frequented a private men's club on 14th Street in Washington, D.C., which spawned rumors among Washington gossips that Barnett was one of the "lavender lads" in the Carter administration's "lavender mafia." Bob Roop's testimony about Barnett's political power is drawn from in his deposition of February 19, 1980 for *Poffo, et al., v. Gulas, et al.* After the Carter presidency, Barnett was appointed to the board of Georgia's State Offender Rehabilitation by Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris in July 1983.

Bob Roop described his attempt to organize a wrestlers' union in the 1970s in an interview with Alex Marvez published in *Three Count* (Dec. 13, 1991). Allegations of athletic commission corruption in Kentucky and Tennessee were made under oath in the depositions of Joseph Donald Pruitt (April 17, 1973) and William Grundy Davis (Oct. 15, 1973), both taken for

Joseph Donald Pruitt v. Nick Gulas, Roy Welch, Wilbur Snyder, Richard Afflis, Sam Muchnick and the National Wrestling Alliance, No. C-7542-A, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Kentucky (Jan. 1973).

Although my letter to President Ronald Reagan asking for help was a waste of time (later, I learned he denied there was *ever* a Hollywood *blacklist* during the stormy days of the motion picture industry in the 1940s and 1950s and regarded pro wrestling "a sporting mudhole" in a column he wrote for the *Des Moines Dispatch* in 1937), my persistence with the Justice Department ultimately had some payoff: when Georgia Congressman Bo Ginn wrote to the U.S. Attorney General on my behalf in 1982 and after Congressman Wyche Fowler and Senator Mack Mattingly wrote in 1984, the Justice Department's Atlanta office was authorized to conduct a preliminary investigation in July 1984. Again, however, that investigation resulted in no further action and was finally closed in 1986.

After several antitrust lawsuits against the NWA in the late 1970s, NWA legal counsel Tench Coxe finally took the antitrust bull by the horns. At the 1980 NWA annual meetings, Coxe told NWA members that two of their longstanding practices invited legal trouble - *refusal to supply talent to non-NWA _promoters* and *blacklisting wrestlers who performed for non-NWA promoters.* Coxe advised NWA promoters to avoid *even the appearance of* either practice because they invited more legal trouble from the Justice Department and from even more civil lawsuits, or both (minutes of the 1980 NWA annual meetings). Coxe was also appointed to defend Thunderbolt Patterson's antitrust lawsuit, located at: *Claude Patterson (Thunderbolt Patterson) v. Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc., James Barnett, National Wrestling Alliance, Jim Crockett, Jim Crockett Promotions, Inc., Eddie Graham (a/k/a Edward Gosset) and Championship Wrestling from Florida, Inc.*, no. C-82-902A, U..S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division.

This account of Antone Ripper Leone's experiences as an independent wrestling promoter in California is based on interviews with Leone in July and August 1987 and with Frank (Sam) Menacker on Oct. 25, 1988 and Menacker's affidavit of Dec. 27, 1984 to the Justice Department and Roy Shire's (Sept. 27, 1985) deposition for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.*, no. C-79-1310A. This description of Eddie Mansfield's pro wrestling career is based partly on Mansfield's deposition of December 2,

1983 for *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.* Ultimately, Mansfield (and Otis Sistrunk) decided not to pursue the NWA legally, preferring instead to embarrass the wrestling industry by arranging for a major exposé on national television - eventually materializing in ABC-TV's *20/20* of 1985. This description of the public hearings held by the Georgia Wrestling Practices Committee is based on my recollection as well as *The Columbus Enquirer* (Oct. 18 and 20, 1984) *The Atlanta Constitution* (Dec. 3, 1984 and April 4, 1985) and the *Atlanta Journal* (Dec. 3, 1984) and *Report of The Wrestling Practices in Georgia Study Committee*, Georgia General Assembly (Dec. 1984).

This account of the New York State investigation of pro wrestling is based partly on Al Vieira's "Politicians Pile Driving Pro Wrestling," *Albany Times Union* (July 28, 1985), C. R. Roberts, "Don't Hurl Wrestling Out of The Ring," *The New York Times* (June 8, 1985), Abraham Bernstein, "Do Hurl Wrestling Out Of The Ring," New York Senate Democratic Task Force (n.d.), *Statement of Irvin Muchnick Before the New York State Senate Task Force on Professional Wrestling* (Oct. 8, 1985), *Statement of Arthur Klein, Frankfurt, Garbus, Klein and Selz, P.C., counsel to Titan Sports, Inc. and the World Wrestling Federation Before the New York State Senate Democratic Task Force on Professional Wrestling* (Oct. 8, 1985), William E. Geist, "Of Wrestlers, Politicians and Showmanship," *The New York Times* (Oct. 9, 1985), Robert E. Gould, "The Trouble With Wrestling," *The New York Times* (Nov. 9, 1985) and Irvin Muchnick, "Don't Worry, Wrestling Will Soon Vanish Back Into Obscurity," *The New York Times* (Nov. 17, 1985).

The final chapter to my long and futile campaign to establish athletic commission regulation of wrestling in Georgia is told in "Breaking The Stranglehold," *Atlanta Constitution* (Feb. 5, 1989), "Promoter Backs Bill to Put Hold on Wrestling Mayhem," *Marietta Daily Journal* (Feb. 21, 1990) and "Candidates Back Wrestling Reforms," *Atlanta Constitution* (July 25, 1990).

Chapter 10: Heavyweight Heist

The unsuccessful attempt by Vince McMahon to recruit Howard Cosell as a TV announcer for pro wrestling in 1984 is described in Cosell's *I Never Played The Game*, New York, William Morrow, 1985. McMahon's admission of promotional competitors' death threats was published in William Taafe's "How Wrestling Got TV In Its Clutches," *Sports Illustrated* (April 29, 1985). Years later, McMahon admitted that even his father would have disapproved of how he assaulted and destroyed the NWA (William Oscar Johnson, "Wrestling with Success; Vince McMahon Has Transformed Pro Wrestling From a Sleazy Pseudosport to Booming Family Fun," *Sports Illustrated*, March 25, 1991) but said his pickings were easy - "I banked on the fact they were behind the times, and they were, all of them" (Bethany McLean, "Inside The World's Weirdest Family Business," *Forbes Magazine*, Oct. 16, 2000).

Much of this chapter is based on court documents associated with three lawsuits: *Georgia Championship Wrestling Inc., Ole Anderson, Ralph Freed, Fred Ward and Gene Anderson v. Vincent K. McMahon, Linda E. McMahon, Paul Jones, Frances Jones, James F. Oates, Jack Brisco and Gerald Brisco, no. D-8928, Fulton County Superior Court, State of Georgia (April 20, 1984); and Georgia Championship Wrestling v. Vincent McMahon, Sr., Vincent McMahon, Jr., Capitol Wrestling Corp, Titan Sports, Inc, James E. Barnett and Dayton Hara Arena, no. C-1-84-725 (Cincinnati) and no. C-3-84-564 (Dayton), U.S. District Court, Southern District of Ohio, Western Division (May 2, 1984); and Jim Crockett Promotions, Inc. and Joe H. Murnick, Inc. v. Titan Sports, Inc., Vincent McMahon, Jr., George Scott, Spectacor, Inc., SMI Partnership, SMI of Richmond, Fred Schabel, Tony Tavares and the City of Richmond, no. 85-0889-R, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Richmond Division (Dec. 2, 1985).*

When the legality of Georgia Championship Wrestling's sale to Vince and Linda McMahon was contested in court, Jerry Brisco admitted he didn't tell Ole Anderson or other minority stockholders of his intention to sell

prior to his deal with McMahon. Jerry said, “I *was looking after my own business*.” And Jack testified, “I felt I had a duty to take care of myself” (depositions of Gerald and Jack Brisco for *Georgia Championship Wrestling, Inc., et al. v. Vincent K. McMahon, et al,* no. D- 8928, Superior Court of Fulton County Georgia, June 5, 1984).

Jim Barnett’s tenure as vice-president of McMahon’s Titan Sports ended shortly after his (“call-for-help”) suicide attempt a week before his 63rd birthday in June 1987 - just 2^ years after Eddie Graham shot himself. After Barnett recovered, he left McMahon’s WWF and was hired by Jim Crockett Promotions to work in its Dallas office. When Crockett sold out to Ted Turner in November 1988, Barnett went to work for Turner Broadcasting with the title *senior advisor.* One shadowy figure that followed Jim Barnett’s promotional career as at least a business partner is his old friend James F. Oates, now a retired insurance executive who lives in a plush high rise condo on Chicago’s Gold Coast. Both Oates and Barnett attended the University of Chicago together in the mid to late 1940s, and Oates occasionally accompanied Barnett to wrestling shows at Chicago’s Marigold Arena and International Amphitheater in the 1950s when Barnett worked with Fred Kohler. Oates said his interest in wrestling was only as an investor (“wrestling appeals to low-lifers,” he said), but he underwrote some of Barnett’s Australian venture as well as Barnett’s subsequent promotions in Georgia, Florida and Tennessee. James Oates was interviewed in January 1987.

After *Sports Illustrated* (April 29, 1985) revealed the circumstances of Bob Backlund’s firing by the WWF, Vince McMahon was interrogated about the Backlund affair under oath. McMahon was asked, *“Was Mr. Backlund relegated to wrestling on undercards toward the end of his time with the World Wrestling Federation?”* McMahon’s attorney intercepted a possible answer, saying, *“I object and instruct the witness not to answer.”* McMahon was then asked, *“In your opinion, is putting a wrestler on undercards one of the ways to get him out of your organization ?”* Again McMahon’s attorney instructed his client not to answer. McMahon replied, *“This is stupid!”* (deposition of Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Aug. 1, 1985 for *James M. Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al.,* no. C-79-1310A).

Eddie Einhorn's comments about the ill-fated *Pro Wrestling USA* promotion were made in an interview on October 28, 1987. The Sgt. Slaughter dispute over merchandising revenue with Vince McMahon is described in *Robert Remus v. Titan Sports, Inc., Titan Enterprises, International Limited and Titan Sports Publications, Inc,* No. CV 850074817, Superior Court, Judicial District of Stamford, Connecticut, (filed Jan. 28, 1985). Roy Shire's views of Vince McMahon were expressed in Shire's deposition of September 27, 1985 in connection with *Wilson v. National Wrestling Alliance, et al,* no. C-79-1310A, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division.

NWA internal bickering during the 1980s is described in various court documents (Southwest Sports, Inc v. Mid-South Sports, Inc, Dallas County District Court, no. 86-9647, July 25, 1986, and Southwest Sports, Inc. v. CBN Continental Broadcasting Network, Inc., d/b/a Continental Syndication, Dallas County District Court, no. 87-6124, May 8, 1987, and Southwest Sports, Inc. v. Byron Robertson, George Gray, John E. Frenkel, Terry Gordy, Michael Seitz, Dale G. Hey and Melissa Hiatt, Dallas County District Court, July 25, 1986).

Jesse Ventura's experiences in pro wrestling are elaborated in - Jesse Ventura (d/b/a Jesse "The Body" Ventura, a/k/a James G. Janos v.

Titan Sports, Inc (d/b/a Titan Sports Enterprises, The World Wrestling Federation and the WWF) and A & H Video Sales Representatives, Inc., (d/b/a Coliseum Video, a New York Corporation), No. 3-91-811, U.S. District Court, District of Minnesota (Dec. 20, 1991), *Ventura v. Titan,* U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, 65 F.3d 725 (Sept. 11, 1995) and his autobiography, Jesse Ventura, *I Ain't Got Time to Bleed., Reworking The Body Politic* (New York, Villard Books, 1999). Other sources for this chapter are: David' Meltzer's (ed.) "Pro Wrestling: 1983-1987" in *Best of the Wrestling Observer 1983-1987,* pp. 3-12; and Steve Beverly's *Television and Professional Wrestling: A Marriage Made in Mayhem and Megabucks,* (Winter 1987), Auburn University and Christopher Palmeri, "We Want to be like Disney," *Forbes,* (Oct. 17, 1988): 133-136.

Chapter 11: Scandal is the Main Event

The NWA's Hawaii extortion scandal is described at: *United States of America v. Lia Maivia, et al.,* Cr 88-1607, U.S. District Court, District of Hawaii (filed Nov. 16, 1988) and "Three Wrestling Promoters Are Accused of Extortion," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* (Nov. 17, 1988), and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Nov. 21, 1988 and Dec. 11, 1989).

The commentary of Ray Whebbe, Jr. concerning steroids and drug testing comes from an interview with him on Jan. 19, 1989. Superstar Billy Graham (Wayne Coleman) first revealed wrestling's steroid problem on KNBC-TV in Los Angeles on February 23, 1990. Graham and Bruno Sammartino appeared on *Entertainment Tonight* (March 8, 1990), and Graham was interviewed by Jodi McDonald on New York's WFAN Radio (March 17, 1990). Hulk Hogan's "never took a shortcut" denial appeared in the *Los Angeles Herald,* July 21, 1990.

Dr. George Zahorian was indicted on June 19, 1991, reported the following day in *USA Today,* the *New York Times* and that evening on *ABC Evening News* and *Entertainment Tonight* and by CBS Morning News. The Zahorian trial record is located at *United States of America v. George* T *Zahorian, III*, No: 1:CR-91-023, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania (filed April 16, 1991). Other sources for this description of the Zahorian trial are reports of David Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter,* Alex Marvez's *Three Count* and Wade Keller's *Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly.* Zahorian's subpoenaed FedEx records show he shipped drugs to 43 pro wrestlers, 37 of whom were employed by WWF at the time deliveries were made. Of these, five steroid shipments were sent to Hulk Hogan in 1998 (addressed variously to *Linda Bolleo, L. Bollea, Terry Bollea, Tiny Bolen* and *Terry Bolea).* The successful gambit by Hogan lawyer Jerry McDevitt to keep Hulk Hogan off the witness stand made news in *USA Today,* the *New York Times,* ABC-TV's *Evening News, Entertainment Tonight* and *CBS Morning News* on June 20, 1991. Other sources of this chapter's description of the Zahorian trial and its aftermath include: Lyle Alzado's "I'm Sick and I'm Scared" and "The Sham Is A Sham" (sidebar), *Sports Illustrated* (July 8, 1991); Irvin Muchnick's "Is Pro Wrestling Down for the Count?" *New York Times* (July 7, 1991); Robert Lipsyte's "The Cancer in Football and Pro Wrestling," *New York Times* (July 12, 1991); Phil Mushnick's *New York Post* column of July 12, 1991

and Vince McMahon, “World Wrestling Federation Answers Body Slams,” *New York Times* (July 14, 1991). Hulk Hogan’s nationally televised denial of steroid use was broadcast on the *Arsenio Hall* show by CBS-TV on July 16, 1991.

This account of the 1991 Florida legislative hearings is based on Alex Marvez, “Florida May Regulate Pro Wrestling,” *Miami Herald* (Nov. 5, 1991) and the reporting of Marvez’s *Three Count*, David Meltzer’s *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and Wade Keller’s *Pro Wrestling Torch* as well as *Professional Wrestling in Florida* by Janet Clark (ed.), Committee on Regulated Industries, Florida Legislature (Oct. 1991). The WWF’s first steroid test was conducted one day before *Entertainment Tonight’s* steroid exposé of November 15, 1991 and days before *Inside Edition’s* exposé of November 19, 1991. Bruno Sammartino’s attack on the WWF’s steroid testing program as “an *elaborate scheme by the WWF’s owner Vince McMahon to end rumors about his biggest stars and allow him to fire less popular wrestlers’* was broadcast on *Entertainment Tonight* (Nov. 18, 1991). Despite WWF legal threats, *Inside Edition* aired its steroid scandal report on November 19, 1991.

Pro wrestling’s sex scandal of 1992 apparently was triggered by the offhand remarks of Superstar Billy Graham and David Shults on *Inside Edition* (January 3, 1992). Additional charges were aired on Mike Tenay’s radio show on the Sports and Entertainment Network (Jan. 4, 1992), John Arezzi’s *Pro Wrestling Spotlight* show on New York’s WEVD radio (Jan. 5, 1992) and Wade Keller’s *Pro Wrestling Focus* show on KFAN radio in Minneapolis-St. Paul (Jan. 5, 1992). Other sources for this chapter’s description include a Billy Graham interview reported by David Meltzer’s *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Jan. 10, 1992) and a Dave Shults interview by Alex Marvez’s *Three Count* (Jan. 6, 1992) and Wade Keller’s *Pro Wrestling Torch* (Jan. 12, 1992); Graham’s accusations of Hogan’s cocaine use were confirmed by two other unidentified wrestlers, according to Meltzer’s *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Feb. 3, 1992). Graham and Shults also appeared on Dan Reilly’s *Wrestle-Radio* talk show in Springfield, MA (Jan. 18, 1992). David Shults talked about WWF executives’ sexual habits and preferences, abuse and harassment in *Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly* (Jan. 16, 1992).

Acclaimed sports journalist Frank Deford addressed the steroid scandal and Hulk Hogan in his ESPN-radio editorial of Feb. 10, 1992: "If those great Hulkster muscles are still steroid induced, then this is a serious scandal. The sponsors, toy stores and television stations must demand Hulk be tested by an independent agency." According to one report, Vince McMahon later telephoned Deford to complain about the editorial, screaming, *"I have proof- I'm not a mobster* (Irvin Muchnick's "Jockbeat," *Village Voice,* March 3, 1992). Pedophile charges against the WWF were first publicized by Phil Mushnick's "WWF to Face Suit Alleging Child Sex Abuse," *New York Post* (Feb. 26, 1992). Barry Orton's homosexual harassment allegations were aired on Las Vegas' KVEG- Radio (Feb. 28, 1992), distributed more broadly by Irvin Muchnick's "Jockbeat", *Village Voice* (March 3, 1992). The resignations of Pat Patterson and Terry Garvin from the WWF on March 2,1992 were reported by the *New York Post* (March 4, 1992). Later, Vince McMahon sued the *Post* and Mushnick, but the litigation was ultimately dropped by McMahon (*Vincent K. McMahon v. New York Post, et al*, No. 93-CV- 345, U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, filed Feb. 17, 1993 and closed on March 22, 1994).

Other reporting on wrestling's drugs and/or sex scandal appeared in: Jeff Savage, "Sleaze no illusion in world of wrestling," *San Diego Union-Tribune* (March 11, 1992) and Savages's "Will Hulk's next fortune be made in Japan?" *San Diego Union-Tribune* (March 13, 1992); John Cherwa and Houston Mitchell, "Wrestling's Star Takes a Tumble," *Los Angeles Times* (March 12, 1992); Phil Mushnick and Michael Shain, "Boy Sex Scandal Rocks Wrestling," *New York Post* (March 12, 1992); *Entertainment Tonight,* which interviewed Billy Jack Haynes and Bob Orton on March 12, 1992; John Nolen, "Portland Wrestler Links Hogan to Steroid Use," *The Oregonian* (March 12, 1992); Irvin Muchnick, "Taste Test," *Vülage Voice* (March 17, 1992); Phil Mushnick, "SEX, LIES and the WWF," *New York Post* (March 18, 1992); Michael Lipton and Irvin Muchnick, "Incredible Bulk?", *People Magazine* (March 23, 1992); Billy Jack Haynes was interviewed by *Three Count* (March 17, 1992); Superstar Graham and David Shults appeared on ABC-TV's *20/20* broadcast on April 17, 1992. Additional reporting on the pedophile scandal appeared in Jeff Savage's "No Holds Barred", *Penthouse* magazine (Sept. 1992) and Irvin Muchnick's "In Bed with the WWF, Sex and Scandal in Pro-wrestling," *The Position* (Oct. 9, 2000).

Vince McMahon's appearance on *Larry King Live* was broadcast by CNN on March 13, 1992. The *Donahue* Show's steroids-and-sex segment was broadcast via syndication on March 16, 1992. My 1992 interview on Ric Carter's *Wrestletalk* radio show on KLAV in Las Vegas was broadcast on March 1, 1992 and a transcript of that interview was published in Alex Marvez (ed.) *Three Count,* numbers 27 and 28 (March 1992); the letter from NWA lawyer Robert Trobich was published in the April 7, 1992 issue of *Three Count* and my response to Trobich was published by *Three Count* on April 21, 1992. The Committee to Clean Up Wrestling's press conference in New York City was held on March 31, 1992; its proceedings were described in "Spotlight on: Michelle DeQuattrro," *Three Count* (April 28, 1992) and New York City's WPIX- TV, Channel 11's *Ten o'clock News* for March 31, 1992. Murray Hodgson's lawsuit and public complaints disappeared when his attorney Ed Nusbaum withdrew from the case after Hodgson's deposition when Nusbaum concluded "Hodgson was a lifelong con man," according to Irvin Muchnick's "In Bed with the WWF, Sex and Scandal in Pro- wrestling," *The Position* (Oct. 9, 2000).

The syndicated Geraldo Rivera TV show *Now It Can Be Told's* 'Ring of Vice " was broadcast on April 3, 1992. About ten months after the broadcast, Vince McMahon sued Geraldo Rivera for libel *(Vincent K. McMahon and Linda McMahon v. Geraldo Rivera, David Shults, Brooke Skulski and Tribune Publishing Co,* No. CV 93 0129803, Superior Court, Stamford, CT, filed Feb. 9, 1993), but later dropped the suit. The CBS *Evening News with Dan Rather* segment on wrestling's scandals was broadcast on April 3, 1992. ABC-TV's *20/20* aired a segment on steroids with Superstar Billy Graham and Mary Lou Gantner on April 17, 1992. Hulk Hogan denied that others injected him with steroids *(New York Daily News,* March 25, 1994). WWF ring announcer Howard Finkel was instructed by McMahon to fraudulently produce a blood sample for a Hulk Hogan HIV test required by the Oregon State Athletic Commission, according to the *New York Daily News* (April 22, 1994) and TV's *A Current Affair.* Hogan told the *Miami Herald* (Dec. 1, 1991): " *When the Big Man spilled blood on this cross, He swore to me Hulkamania will never die,'* and asserted "I've been born again" on Pat Robertson's *700 Club* TV show on May 23, 1994.

Vince McMahon was indicted for conspiracy to defraud the Food and Drug Steroid Law on November 18, 1993 (*United States v. Vincent K. McMahon and Titan Sports*, No. 93-CT-1276, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York (filed Nov. 19, 1993). The trial was reported by David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (July 1994) and Wade Keller (ed.) *Pro Wrestling Torch* (July 1994). The post- trial letter from former wrestler Steve Musulin of Charlottesville, Virginia was published in Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Aug. 15, 1994). Two of Dr. Zahorian's wrestler clients died a few weeks after the McMahon steroid trial: Thomas Gilbert III (Eddie Gilbert), 33, was found dead in his bed on February 18, 1995 and John William Minton (Big John Studd) died from liver cancer at age 46 on March 20, 1995. The investigation of witness tampering and obstruction of justice in the 1994 McMahon steroid trial was reported by the *New York Post* (Nov. 22, 1995). According to the *Post*, Justice Department investigators believed Emily Feinberg's trial testimony may have been compromised because she had been pumped for information prior to trial by Martin Bergman, husband of McMahon attorney Laura Brevetti.

Chapter 12: The Business Exposed

The grim pronouncement that "Wrestling is what America is all about" comes from former Chicago promoter Bob Luce, "Lord Of The Ring," *Chicago Magazine* (Nov. 1976), pp. 33-34. According to Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys* (1937), the last time serious money was bet on the outcome of a pro wrestling match was in 1917 when challenger Earl Caddock defeated the favored champion, Joe "Scissors King" Stecher in Omaha and Nebraskans lost thousands of dollars, and some their farms. Although Joe Stecher and his brother Tony were then *doing business*, "the wrestling game didn't really begin to fall into disrepute (despite Frank Gotch's Chicago bouts with Hackenschmidt) until Stecher tangled with Caddock. Again, the unsuspecting friends and supporters of a wrestling king were taken into camp by the sharpers."

Jesse Ventura's problems with the wrestling industry are described in: Jesse's I Ain't Got Time to Bleed, Reworking the Body Politic from the Bottom Up, New York: Villard Books (1999) and his lawsuits: Jesse Ventura (d/b/a Jesse "The Body" Ventura, a/k/a James G Janos) v. Titan Sports, World Wrestling Federation and A & H Video Sales Representatives, Inc. (d/b/a Coliseum Video, a New York Corporation), No. 3-91-811, U.S. District Court, District of Minnesota (filed Dec. 20, 1991) and Jesse Ventura v. Titan Sports, et. al., No. 94-3103, No. 94-3235, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, 65 F.3d 725 (filed Sept. 1995), and St. Paul Pioneer Press (April 13, 1994).

The WWF financial data reported here are drawn from the WWF's IPO (*World Wrestling Federation Entertainment, Inc. Public Stock Offering Registration Statement)* filed with Securities and Exchange Commission, Aug. 3, 1999. Other financial data are from David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Feb. 9, 1998, Jan. 4, 1999, June 7, 1999 and Aug. 16, 1999) and Peter Kafka, "Live Action Heroes," *Forbes* magazine (March 22, 1999). After Vince McMahon sold 17% of his WWF stock in 1999, McMahon's remaining share of WWF stock was worth $1.23 billion.

This description of Ultimate Warrior's (Jim Hellwig) legal problems with Vince McMahon are described in several lawsuits *(Warrior and Ultimate Creations, Inc. v. Titan Sports, World Wrestling Federation, Vincent*

K McMahon, Linda McMahon, International Promotions, Inc., Stanley Toergerson, MacFrugals Bargains Close Outs, Inc and John Doe 1-15, No. CV96-15377, Superior Court, State of Arizona, County of Maricopa (filed Aug. 28, 1996) and *Titan Sports, Inc, v. James Hellwig a/k/a/ Warrior and Ultimate Creations, Inc.*, U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, no. 3:98-CV-467, filed April 26, 1999), the *New York Post* (Feb. 8, 1993) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Sept. 9 and 16, 1996). This discussion of Rena Mero's problems with the WWF is based on: *Rena Mero, a/k/a Sable v. Titan Sports, Inc., a/k/ a World Wrestling Federation,* No. 399CV1053, U.S. District Court, District of Connecticut (filed June 3, 1999 and amended June 22, 1999) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (June 14, 1999, June 28, 1999, Aug. 2, 1999, Aug. 9, 1999) and Don Kaplan's "Sleeperhold," *New York Post* (June 13, 1999).

Steve DeBlasio's injury case is described in "The Wrestler Who Sued Wrestling," *Palm Beach News/Sun Sentinel* (March 23, 1986) and "Injured Wrestler Loses" (Sept. 28, 1989). Charles Austin's injury and lawsuit is discussed in "Jury Gives Injured Wrestler $27 Million," Associated Press (April 30, 1994) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (May 9, 1994 and June 28, 1999). The Darren Drosdov injury was reported by Cathy Burke and Maria Malave, "Wrestler May Be Paralyzed in L.I. Tragedy" and Rod Dreher's "Rope In This Brutal 'Sport'," *New York Post* (Oct. 7, 1999) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Oct. 18, 1999).

This account of Owen Hart's death and its circumstances is based on: Kia Shante Breaux, "Wrestler Killed During WWF Event," Associated Press (May 24, 1999), Phil Mushnick, "Another Sacrificial Lamb Will Take His Place," *New York Post* (May 25, 1999), Dave Stubbs column, *Montreal Gazette* (May 25, 1999), David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (May 31, 1999, June 7, 1999, June 14, 1999, June 21 and 28, 1999) and the *Calgary Suns* coverage of Hart's death of June 2, 5, and 6, 1999. Owen Hart's family filed suit (against the WWF and other parties associated with

the rigging and cable equipment involved in his death) for negligence on June 15, 1999 in the Circuit Court of Jackson County, Missouri.

Other sources are T. Trent Gegax and Jerry Adler, "Death in the Ring" *Newsweek* magazine (June 7, 1999) and Cheryl Wittenauerl, "Hart's Lawyer: Rigging was a 'Makeshift Contraption'," Associated Press (June 16, 1999), and Darryl Wrobel, "Wrestling's Dark Secret - 21 Deaths in Five Years," *National Enquirer* (June 15, 1999). Cable TV's Arts & Entertainment's broadcast of "*Biography: The Life and Death of Owen Hart*" produced critical commentary about wrestling's unsafe working conditions, as did Bob Blakey's "The Tragedy of Owen Hart," *Calgary Herald* (Nov. 4, 1999) and Christine Bahls and Michael Tearson, "The Ring of Truth," *Philadelphia Daily News* (Nov. 4, 1999) and Don Kaplan, "Hart Didn't Want to Wrestle," *New York Post* (Nov. 16, 1999). Hulk Hogan's memorable *"ride the horse 'till it drops, shoot it and eat the horse"* comment about McMahon was broadcast nationally during Hogan's appearance on CNN's *Larry King Live* (June 23, 1999). The WWF's $18 million dollar settlement in the Owen Hart lawsuit was reported by Jeffrey Jones, "Wrestler's Widow Says Huge Legal Victory Bittersweet," Reuters (Nov. 20, 2000).

This description of the 1996 Erich Kulas *blading* incident is based on David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Oct. 18, 1999). The California NAACP's assertion that *blading* was "the most barbaric aspect of the wrestling business" appeared in a report submitted to the California Athletic Commission and Governor Edmund G. Brown in April 1979 by Oliver A. Jones, counsel to the NAACP. Pennsylvania Athletic Commissioner James J. Binns was interviewed on March 18, 1986. Former Oregon Athletic Commission director Bruce Anderson was interviewed on July 17, 1989; other commentary by Anderson appears in David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (June 7, 1999, June 14, 1999).

The life and death of Kerry von Erich (Kerry Adkisson) are described further in: Irvin Muchnick's "Born-Again Bashing," *Penthouse* (Oct. 1988):94-132 and Skip Hollandsworth, "The Fall of the House of Von Erich," *D Magazine* (Feb. 1988):48-102 and Dave Meltzer, *Tributes, Remembering Some of the World's Greatest Wrestlers*, pp. 71-80, Etobicoke, Ontario, Winding Star Press (2001). This account of Dynamite Kid's (Tom Billington) addiction to painkillers is based on his autobiography (Tom

Billington and Allison Coleman, *Pure Dynamite*, Toronto: SW Publishing Ltd., 1999) and "Interview with Tom Billington," *Powerslam* magazine (June 29, 1999) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Nov. 11, 1999). This chapter's description of drug-testing in pro wrestling and wrestlers who flunked those tests is based on David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (June 8, 1993, June 12, 1993, Aug. 9, 1993, Dec. 16, 1993, April 24, 1995, May 29, 1995, Dec. 16, 1996, July 14, 1997, Oct. 20, 1997, Feb. 23, 1998, March 30, 1998, May 18, 1998, July 20, 1998, Aug. 10, 1998, Dec. 28, 1998, April 5, 1999, April 26, 1999 and May 24, 1999).

Wrestling's death toll is described in: ABC-TV's *Wide World of Sports'* "Requiem for the Heavyweights" (broadcast April 29, 1995), Kevin McCoy's "The Dangers of the Wrestling World," *New York Daily News* (March 3, 2000), ESPN-TV's "Outside the Lines" (broadcast March 30, 1999) and John Maher, "Ring of Death," *Austin American-Statesman* (Aug. 6, 2000). David Meltzer's "drugs are a major issue in this business" was reported by Meltzer's (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (March 7, 1995) and Meltzer's actuarial analysis of 17 wrestler deaths in 13 years was published in *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Feb. 23, 1998). Another actuarial analysis of wrestler death rates appeared in Darryl Wrobel's "Wrestling's Dark Secret - 21 Deaths in Five Years," *National Enquirer* (June 15, 1999). The addiction admissions of Davey Boy Smith (David Smith) appeared in David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (April 26, 1999). Other sources for this chapter are: James Quirk, Jr., "Pro Wrestler Dies in Ring," Hazleton, Pa., *Standard Speaker* (Jan. 9, 2000), Mark Wangrin, "The Death of Bobby Duncum, Jr.," *Austin American-Statesman* (Jan. 25, 2000), Kevin McCoy, "Drugs Choke The Wrestling World" and "Wrestlers Lured to Risky Drugs," *New York Daily News* (March 3, 2000) and a two-part series by John Maher, "Ring of Death", *Austin American-Statesman* (Aug. 6, 2000) and "Ultimate Price," The *Austin American-Statesman* (Aug. 7, 2000).

This account of the state of Oregon's drug-testing procedures and legislative reconsideration of them in 1999 and Bruce Anderson's commentary about the controversy is based on the reporting of David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (June 7, 1999, June 14, 1999, July 19, 1999). The Indiana criminal investigation of Dr. Joel Hackett and

his subsequent medical license suspension was reported by the *Indianapolis Star-News* (Aug. 28, 1999 and Sept. 3, 1999), Phil Mushnick's *New York Post* column of Aug. 30, 1999 and Kevin McCoy's "Ring Fan Doc Prescribed Illegally, Says Complaint," *New York Daily News* (March 3, 2000).

The Scranton Catholic Youth Center's decision to cancel WWF wrestling shows was reported by David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Sept. 7, 1998). The WWF wrestling *angle* that introduced its harder edge is described in Chris Heath's "Stone Cold Steve Austin," *Rolling Stone* magazine (Dec. 24, 1988-Jan. 7, 1999). The early 1999 response by Vince McMahon to his critics was published by the *New York Daily News* (Feb. 28, 1999). Results of the Indiana University content analysis of WWF TV shows were presented on *Inside Edition* in early March, 1999. Federal Communications Commissioner Gloria Tristani informally recommended TV wrestling be moved out of prime time (David K. Li, "Lords of the Ring Slammed," *New York Post,* Oct. 19, 1999). Ted Turner's claim that Vince McMahon's TV language, violence and sexual content caused McMahon's trouble with advertisers was broadcast on CNN's *Larry King Live* (Dec. 14, 1999). The corporate backlash and exit of TV advertisers from WWF wrestling shows was noted by the *Wall Street Journal* (Nov. 30, 1999) and David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Nov. 8, 1999, Dec. 6, 1999, Dec. 20, 1999).

Vince McMahon does not suffer critics gladly - *he sues them.* McMahon's admitted "ruthless aggression" is an endearing quality for his lawyer Jerry S. McDevitt of Kirkpatrick & Lockhart of Pittsburgh who represents McMahon at a cost of about a million dollars a year ("Firm Goes to the Mat for Clients," *Cal Law,* Nov. 10, 1999). McMahon is involved in litigation more or less continually over trademark and contract disputes with wrestlers who dare challenge his employment practices and libel claims against journalists whose published or broadcast reports he cannot control, such as Phil Mushnick and Geraldo Rivera. McMahon also sued one of his critics (L. Brent Bozell of the Parents Television Council) for "tortious interference in contracts, product disparagement and defamation" and magazines that published pictures of his stars without a kickback or his approval (in addition to his suit against *Playboy,* see *Titan Sports, Inc. v.*

Comic World Corp. Starlog Group, Inc., O'Quinn Studios, Inc., Kerry O'Quinn and Norman Jacobs,

No. 87 Civ. 0178, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, decided July 13, 1988 and *Titan Sports v. Comic World, et al*, No. 887734, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, decided March 14, 1989; also see "Free Speech Bout, Hulk Hogan promoter tries to pin wrestling fan magazines," *American Bar Association Journal*, p. 24, August 1989).

Epilogue

Recent wrestler books cited here are: Gary Michael Cappetta's *Bodyslams! Memoirs of a Wrestling Pitchman* (Signature Book Printing, Inc., 2000), Tom Billington (with Alison Coleman), *Pure Dynamite, The Price You Pay for Wrestling Stardom* (Winding Stair Press, Stewart House Publishing, 2001) Missy Hyatt (with Charles Salzberg and Mark Goldblatt), *Missy Hyatt, First Lady of Wrestling* (Winnipeg: Printcrafters, 2001), Mick Foley's *Have A Nice Day, A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (Regan Books, 1999), and Foley's, *Foley is Good and the Real World is Faker than Wrestling* (Regan Books, 2001), The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), *The Rock Says: The Most Electrifying Man in Sports-Entertainment* (Regan Books, 2000), Chyna (Joanne Laurer), *If They Only Knew,* (Regan Books, 2000) and Bill Goldberg (with Steve Goldberg), *I'm Next, The Strange Journey of America's Most Unlikely Superhero* (Crown Publishing Group, 2000). Dave Meltzer's book review cited here appeared in his *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Nov. 13, 2000).

The contrary evidence to the Rock's claim of "no racism" in pro wrestling is located in a historical compendium of black wrestlers (Julian Shabazz's *Black Stars of Professional Wrestling,* Clinton, S.C., Awesome Records, 1999), a study of stereotyping and racism in wrestling by Karl Stern *(DragonKing Update Report,* June 2000), and the recent racial discrimination lawsuit initially filed by Harrison "Hardbody" Norris *(Harrison Norris v. World Championship Wrestling, Inc, and Turner Sports, Inc.*, No. 1:00-CV-0369, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division, amended complaint filed April 27, 2001) and Kazuo "Sonny" Onoo *{Kazuo Onoo v. World Championship Wrestling, Inc. and Turner Sports, Inc,* No. 1:00-CV-0368, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division, amended complaint filed April 27, 2001) and later enlarged to include eight other nonwhite wrestler plaintiffs - Bobby "Hardwork" Walker, Marcial Davis, Darron Easterling, Claude "Thunderbolt" Patterson, Rick Reeves, Bounthan Saengsiphan, Lester Speight and William Worthen. Also see: Lyle V. Harriss, "Wrestlers'

Suit Claims Racial Discrimination", *The Atlanta Journal,* August 12, 2000; attorney Carry Ichter was interviewed on Jan. 4, 2002.

Johnny Valiant's current circumstances are described in "A Wrestling Original," *Newsday* (Feb. 16, 1999); Tony Atlas is profiled in "Atlas Back on Roanoke's Map," *Roanoke Times* (Aug. 20, 2000). The letter from Johnny Valentine's wife Sharon to the wrestling community was posted on the wrestling legends website on Aug. 9, 2000. Months before his death, Wahoo McDaniel was profiled by Greg Oliver on the *SLAM! Wrestling* website on Aug. 3, 2000 and by Mike Shropshire's "Wahoo McDaniel", *Sports Illustrated* (July 2, 2001). Ric Flair's remarks about unions and health insurance were given in an interview with *SLAM! Wrestling* in July 2001. Rowdy Roddy Piper's comments regarding the death of Johnny Valentine and the industry's need to care for its own are taken from an interview by Alex Marvez of Feb. 23, 2001. Roddy Piper's lawsuit is located at *Flying Noodles, Inc. and Roderick Toombs, professionally known as Roddy Piper v. World Championship Wrestling, Inc., Turner Sports, Inc. and Turner Entertainment Group,* No. 00VS00979OH, State Court of Fulton County, State of Georgia (amended Dec. 6, 2001). Also see: Jarred Schenke, "WCW Asked to Pay Piper," *Atlanta Business Journal,* May 25, 2001; Piper's attorney Cary Ichter was interviewed on Jan. 4, 2002.

The commentary of Lou Thesz about wrestler unions is located at Ed Koch, "Thesz: Too Many Champs Ruin it", *Las Vegas Valley Times* (June 1, 1981) and his internet interview of Feb. 27, 2001 on SLAM! *Sports.* Steve Austin's remarks about unionizing wrestlers were made in an interview with Wade Keller and published in the *1995 Torch Yearbook* (Dec. 14, 1995). Bill Watts' comments about a wrestlers' union were offered during his interview with David Meltzer in *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Sept. 28, 1992). The full commentary of Eddie Einhorn ("I like a lotta things about wrestling") was reported by United Press International on November 22, 1984: "*The thing I like about wrestling is that I think it mirrors life. It represents the hype we all have to use to sell our product:. Look at boxing, for example. You've got names now like Bone crusher' and Freddie the Animal.' And where do you think Muhammad Ali learned all his shtick ? From a guy like Gorgeous George. In the wrestling business, you sell fluff. That's all it is. I think that's what's wrong with the NFL - they forgot the whole thing was a big media hype in the first place, and they forgot how to*

sell their product; now look what happened to them.. To me, all sports are simply entertainment:, not religion, and I include both baseball and football when I say that. I know some people think these two sports are religion, but when you forget they're really nothing more than the entertainment business, you're in trouble. I like a htta things about wrestling. There is no union. And if one of those blond superstars gets hurt or retires, you can create another one and you don't even have to draft him.. All you have to do is get a bottle of peroxide, come up with a name for him and the crowds ove him."

Dr. James Andrews's commentary about wrestlers' health problems is located in "The Physician and Sports Medicine" reported in David Meltzer (ed.) *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (June 26, 2000). Meltzer's long-term study of disabled and dead wrestlers was reported in *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (Nov. 20, 2000). The Terry Taylor interview by Mark McKenzie was posted at www.bordercitywrestling.com/taylor - interview.htm. Activities of the Cauliflower Alley Club are described at http://caulifloweralleyclub.org. This discussion of a wrestlers' bill of rights was informed by Jack Newfield's "The Shame of Boxing," *The Nation* magazine (Nov. 12, 2001, pp. 13-22).

The prevailing legal test for classifying workers as employee or independent contractor is located in the 1997 Internal Revenue Ruling 87-41,1987-CB 296. Previously, courts have ruled that employee status be granted stage actors (Jack Hammer Assocs. v. Delmy Propds., 499 NYS 2d 418, 419-20 (1st Dept 1986), ballet dancers (Berman v. Barone, 88 NRS 2d 327, 328 (3dDept 1949) and circus clowns (Challis v National Producing Co., 88 NRS 2d 731, 732 (3d Dept 1949).

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Information Office and Esther Daniello and Emil Moschella who coordinated file retrieval in the Records Management Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Research for this book also benefitted from the efforts of Gary Galemore, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. We also acknowledge assistance of the Chicago Historical Library. The considerable legal research required by this book was facilitated by many persons - attorneys Tom Cetrino, James H. Coil III, Edward Fitzpatrick, Brain P. Gilfedder, Cary Ichter, Jack Littleton, Nick Lotito, John Mraz, Dominic Potts, Dennis Shortridge, Lisa Sills, William T. Warner and Yuri B. Zelinsky. And our lengthy investigation of Bruiser Brody's (Frank Goodish's) murder was facilitated by unusual cooperation of Chief Judge Ramon E. Gomez Colon of the Tribunal General De Justica de Bayamon of Bayamon, Puerto Rico who released the entire docket file of Frank's murder investigation and trial.

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We acknowledge three especially valuable resources used in producing this book: J Michael Kenyon's remarkable compilation of published wrestling history in his *Wrestling As We Liked It (WAWLI) Papers*, several thoughtful articles written by Irvin Muchnick and David Meltzer's wrestling industry weekly, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter.* We also are grateful for the assistance of several persons inside The Business who contributed to this work but who wish to remain anonymous; they know who they are. And Weldon Johnson wishes to acknowledge the wise counsel of two colleagues who shared his long odyssey with Samuel Taylor

Coleridge into the realm of *willing suspension of disbelief:* Chicago attorneyJaroslawa Zelinsky Johnson and pop culture specialist Sophia Juliana Johnson of Smith College.

[1] This book freely uses pro wrestling's insider terminology - *wrestlespeak*, a grammar of idioms that names key elements in pro wrestling's longstanding con and, until recently, another industry secret. *Wrestlespeak* was adopted in about 1910 from *carney* (carnival hustlers' secret argot) to conceal meaning from outsiders.

[2] Dick the Bruiser died at age 62 in November 1991; Andre The Giant died at age 46 in January 1993; Crusher Jerry Blackwell died at age 45 in January 1995; Paul Boesch died at age 79 in March 1989; John Boyd died of a heart attack at age 56 on August 7, 1999; Dino Bravo was murdered in a mob hit at age 44 in March 1993; Bobo Brazil (Houston Harris) died at age 73 in January 1998; Haystacks Calhoun died at age 56 on Dec. 7, 1989; Ed Capral died at 70 on April 15, 1997; Krippler Karl Davis died at age 69 in July 1977; Buddy Fuller (Edward Welch) died at age 71 in January 1996; Eric the Red (Eric Hansen) died at age 34 in 1978; former University of Georgia football coach Johnny Griffith died at age 78 in April 2003; Nick Gulas died at age

76 in January 1991; Ann Miriam Campbell Gunkel died in February 1987 at age 50 after a struggle with cancer; Missouri Mauler (Larry Hamilton) died at age 65 in July 1996; Paul Jones, who was Ray Gunkel's partner and later Jim Barnett's *front man* for Georgia Championship Wrestling, died on April 17, 1988 in Atlanta at 86; Klondike Bill (Bill Soloweyko) died at age 68 in November, 2000; Antone "Ripper" Leone died at age 77 in March 1994; Dale Lewis died at 62 from leukemia on August 30, 1997; Pedro Martinez died in February 1998; Hiro Matsuda (Yasuhiro Kojima) died at age 62 in November 1999; LeRoy McGuirk died in September 1988; Frank "Sam" Menacker died at age 79 in January 1994; Peter Maivia died in June 1982; Gorilla Monsoon (Robert Marella) died at age 62 in November 1999; Sam Muchnick died at age 93 in December 1998; Dirty Dick Murdoch (Hoyt Murdoch) died at age 49 in June 1996, and Leo Nomellini died at age 76 in October 2000; Pat O'Connor died at age 66 in August 1990; longtime Oregon NWA promoter Don Owen died at age 90 in August 2002; Tom Renesto died at age 72 in April, 2000; Nature Boy Buddy Rogers (Herman Rohde) died at age 71 in June 1992; Buzz Sawyer (Bruce

Woyan) died at age 32 in February 1992; The Sheik (Ed Farhat) died at age 78 in January 2003; Oki Shikina died in December 1983; Roy Shire died at age 71 in October 1992; Wilbur Snyder died at age 62 in December 1991; Gordon Solie died at age 71 in July 2000; Milo Steinborn died at age 95 in February 1989; Tarzan Tyler (Camille Tourville) died at age 58 in December 1985; Fritz von Erich (Jack Adkisson) died at age 68 in September 1997 and his sons David, Chris, Kerry and Mike died in 1984, 1991, 1993 and 1987, respectively; Fred Ward died at age 76 in May 1992; Herb Welch died at age 91 in March 1999; Roy Welch died at age 75 in September 1977; Hosea Williams died at age 74 in November 2000: Tim Woods died of a massive heart attack on November 30, 2002; Bearcat Wright (Edward Wright) died at age 50 in August 1982 and Tojo Yamamoto (Harold Watanabe) died at age 65 in February 1992. And I cannot forget Eddie Faieta who left this world on Sept. 18, 1993.

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